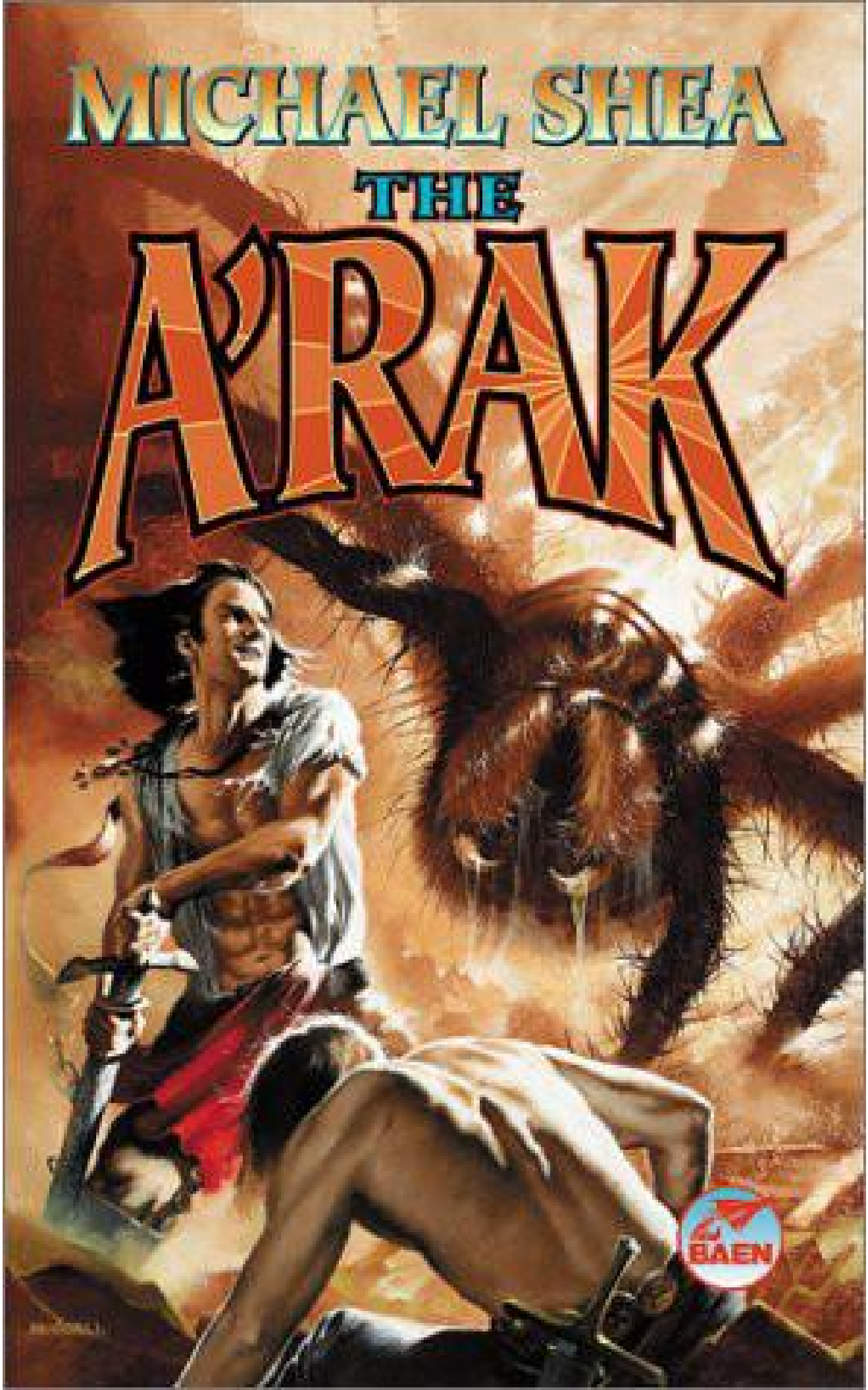
MICHAEL SHEA

THE ARAK



BAEN

The A'rak

Michael Shea

SHAG MARGOLD'S PREFACE TO THE A'RAK

One densely foggy morning not many months before the events here recorded, the witch Gnarl-Bone the Bearded walked along the rocky shore of her native Strega. She was attended by two of her myrmidames who were, shortly, to assist in her conveyance, for Gnarl-Bone purposed to go seeking something which her researches—researches prosecuted over several decades—had at last persuaded her lay not far off.

Strega is the westernmost isle of the Astrygal Island Chain, and while witches in their varied collegia, cloisters, bibliotroves and incunabularia have dominated most of the islands time out of mind, it is on Strega in particular that the sisterhood's greatest archivists have founded their fastnesses. Strega is the Lore-hoard of the Astrygals, and is, in consequence, home to the Lore's most potent adepts. And among these gathered prodigies, Gnarl-Bone is, by any reckoning, among the two or three Preeminents.

Indeed, this search towards whose conclusion she now bestrode the surf-scoured shingle (with a visage—always fierce—contorted by hope to a near demon-ferocity)—this search had been stimulated by clues which, to any other eyes than hers, would have been mere fragments of enigma: a couplet from an obscure Angrian epode seven thousand lines in length; a half dozen words of digression in Skatagary's mad, visionary *Geophobion*; a never previously noticed inconsistency in Punktil's *Digitary of Dead Stars*. These had individually (let alone the connection between them) eluded the greatest scholars; in greater Gnarl-Bone, they had sparked the hope of a priceless acquisition, and on this misty, moisty Stregan morning she marched, in a rage of suspenseful eagerness, either to embrace her prize, or to know herself deluded these long years.

"Here!" she boomed, midway across a surf-lashed cove of shingle. She faced the sea, and her myrmidames crouched ready at her either side. She and they marched into the breakers' foamy onslaught, trudging stolidly out until, waist-deep, Gnarl-Bone made a peremptory gesture at the next

incoming wave. The obedient billow surged up to a great height, and, just as it neared the trio, arched over their heads and back around them, enveloping them in a great bubble. Now they strode offshore within this air-globe, the myrmidames dropping to all fours to trundle it forward along the seafloor at their mistress' direction. As their sphere sank under the surface, the sorceress with a second gesture filled it with light, which spilled out far beyond their vehicle in all directions, and draped in brilliance the seafloor's weedy, undulous terrain.

Gnarl-Bone stood on air, thoughtfully stroking her tattered beard, directing her dog-trotting minions now here, now there. These two dames, with not four centuries of age between them, were mere pups beside their venerable mistress, but still they found it toilsome negotiating the history-strewn slopes and ravines of the circum-Stregan sea-bottom. The Astrygals have fought off more than one invasion (many of these from the air) and the seafloors round those isles are crowded with the hulks and bones of beaten Ambition.

Their search was long, but at length came a moment when Gnarl-Bone's eyes narrowed, and the harsh crags of her visage slowly softened with an emotion she had nearly forgotten in her long years of dark endeavor and recondite inquiry: awe.

Their radiant globe trundled toward what, in its weedy raiment, could only be a giant, crook-legged skeleton of unearthly anatomy. They circled it, spilling light across a long body like jointed armor, and the jagged jut of broken, blade-like wings. Within the ruin of the central body, whose form might be likened to a stove-in hull (though no Kolodrian war-galley, nor even ten such, matched its size) a much smaller, compact shape lay nested. At sight of this the sorceress' cragged and gullied countenance contorted in a ghastly ecstasy. Witchcraft's intricate speculations, and anfractuous inductions, are so often inconclusive, that confirmation savors sweet indeed.

From Gnarl-Bone's discovery flowed all the momentous events herein related. The narrative is presented by two of its chief actors: my dear friend

Nifft the Lean, the Ephesionite thief, and Lagademe the Nuncio, a woman of irreproachable courage and character—as, indeed, any Nuncio of her reputation is likely to be. I have inter-leaved their accounts, regularly alternating between their testimonies. This, I believe, allows the reader a readier grasp of developments on several fronts.

While I have reproduced Nuncio Lagademe's testimony very nearly in its entirety, I have had to trim Nifft's account, for my friend was familiar with the Nuncio's account, and included in his own many remarks upon hers. As these were largely in the nature of self-justifications or retorts to some of the Nuncio's observations, I have pruned them off of the plausible thief's narrative. Such deletions can be assumed to have been made on every other page of Nifft's chapters. Where I have excised a particularly lengthy one of Nifft's divagations, I indicate the lacuna with the following typographical mark: (. . .)

Hagia—our grim drama's setting—is the third largest of the nine Astrygals, but the thaumaturgic sorority have for unknown reasons never settled in the island's northern half. North Hagia, all hills and river-valleys, has anciently been home to a pastoral nation. In recent centuries, of course, its metropolis, Big Quay, on the Haagsford River, is a mighty entrepot of warehousing and banking concerns, one of the great hubs of trade and speculation dominating the commerce that swarms across the southern Sea of Agon. While the city's situation, midway between the bustling economies of the Ingens Cluster, the Ephesion Chain, and the Great Shallows' southern rim, has always suited it for this role, its era of commercial hegemony only began, of course, with the coming of the A'Rak, whose temples came to stand among the proudest of the rising nation's majestic financial edifices.

It ill behooves the historiographer to pass judgement on a nation's choice of gods, nor do I wish to anticipate further that which Nifft and Lagademe provide in detail hereafter. Whatever one's private estimation of the North Hagians' bargain, their Covenant with the A'Rak, no person of any humanity will deny that its final cost, recorded in these pages, was such as to still the tongue of Reprobation, and fill Reproof's stern eye with Pity's tears.

Targvad's *A'Rak-on-Epos*, as rendered from the High Archaic by Roddish the Minusk, provides perhaps the best brief evocation of that monstrous deity's aura of menace, as it has been attested to by generations of foreign observers and commentators:

A'Rak-on-Epos

Through a crack A'Rak crawled in the sky of his world
Out to oceans of space where the great star-wheels whirled;
He tiptoed across this white pavement of stars,
and up through the floor of his new world—ours.

The first world he'd feasted on festered and bled,
A charnel house heaped with his harvests of dead,
till his undying hunger was driven to flee
by the scourge of a Foe more immortal than he.

Now lowly he lurks here, a tenant discreet,
And sparingly, modestly sups at his meat—
Sends his spawn out a-hunting and hides 'neath the soil,
then devours his sons and possesses their spoils.

But once he ran rampant, and will never forget
the untrammelled slaughter that fevers him yet
in dreams when he rears up his gore-crusted jaws,
and feeds at his will without limits or laws.

Now pious he crouches in churches and whispers
of riches his vassals may reap from their Vespers,
and devours them in nibbles, by alms and by tithes,
though worlds were once fields that his fangs swept like scythes.

As he once in abundance of butchery bathed
when from his greed escaped nothing that breathed,
Howso pious and sparing he shepherd and shear thee,
Forget not! His lust is to slaughter and tear thee!
—Shag Margold

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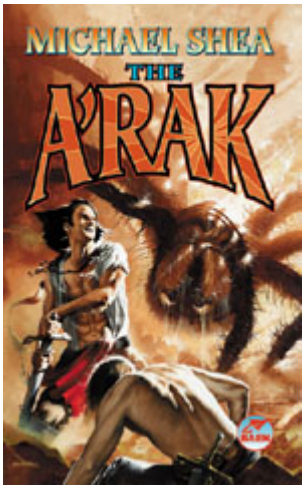
The A'rak



PROSPEROUS HAGIA'S VAULTS BRIMMED WITH GOLD.

HER WAREHOUSES BULGED WITH THE GOODS OF THE SOUTHERN SEAS.

SHE HAD THE SPIDER-GOD TO THANK FOR HER PROSPERITY.

But beneath Hagia's ancient bargain with the A'Rak lay the direst danger. That mercenary kingdom had mortgaged its soul in its pact with the giant arachnoid. When the note fell due, death of the most hideous kind awaited the multitudes of that affluent and bustling nation.

As Hagia's debt falls due, two foreigners arrive in Big Quay, her capital: Lagademe and her team, foremost among the world's Nuncios 'deliverers of anything to anywhere' and Nifft the Lean, thief and rogue extraordinaire.

Nifft and Lagademe, strangers to one another at the outset, will soon be struggling side by side for their lives-and a nation's survival-against the most hideous foe in the annals of Sword and Sorcery fiction.

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To my dearly beloved
Linda, Della, and Jake

BAEN BOOKS by Michael Shea

The Incompleat Nifft

LAGADEME I

We made a delivery to some herb-haags in the Carnalin Mountains, not far upcoast from Lebanoi on the eastern shore of the Great Shallows, and it was from them that we obtained the commission for our Hagian delivery.

We delivered to the haags—with no small trouble up the crooked roads to their steep-perched little hamlet—a gryf-gryf, for the haags use these monsters' urine to catalyze many of their most efficacious infusions. When the delivery was accomplished, the senior haag had me in to her study—a plank table in the midst of one of their overwhelmingly odorous potting sheds.

"Gryf's got a biter broke," she observed sullenly, referring to a severe crack in one of our delivery's tusks.

"Yes," I said shortly, my mouth still puckered by the exceeding sour wine she had poured me. "Brute got his claws through the bars, broke that spoke on the clanker's wheel there." (We use the two-axle clanker for heavy deliveries, rather than the two-wheel quickshaw we much prefer.) "Two of my men—Raschle and Olombo there, had to club it near senseless to save the vehicle. That's how his biter got cracked."

This senior haag, Radax, had canines so outgrown they weren't unlike little tusks themselves. "Hard cargo," she conceded. She hefted a poke of Kolodrian lictors, our honorarium, in her soil-blackened paw, gimleting me with a sullen look that was meant, I thought, to convey a grave doubt of some kind—perhaps about proposing what she then, after paying me, proposed:

"Happen a near gossip of a dear clansister half removed of mine hath need on a crew o' Nuncers yourselfs-like, good Dame. Needs them down to North Hagia. Thrice pay to this here is proposed, as the wayfaring's to be done down in the spidergod's webby wolds an' what-all."

That the stipend was princely was not my first thought on hearing this proposed commission. Nor did I first note that the isle was a part of the world I had not yet seen, though this is a consideration that weighs with me, as a rule. What struck me at once, rather, was the geography of the proposition. With Hagia lying south-southeast of this coast, and our course hence a diagonal down the length of the Great Shallows, we must, if we took this commission, pass hard by the raft cities of the Hydrobani Archipelago, in whose great hive of brothels and gaming dens my sole and precious son Persander had perversely apprenticed himself to acquire the most reverend arts of Gaming, to wit: shilling, sharping, dealing, duping, dicing, finessing and fleecing.

My beloved Persander, my precious but willful son whom I, in my helpless outrage, had denounced and forever banished from my sight! There was a poignant humor in this banishing of course, for since Persander grew to his young manhood, I scarcely *saw* him once in a year. But the break itself, and my own harsh, denouncing words to him—this was a galling pain in my heart, as it would be in any mother's. I can run mountain trail all day and night long with the toughest, but a woman in her full maturity knows that the years must be counted like precious coin, and that a broken love long unmended can quick enough turn to a broken love forever unmended.

How I had grieved in the two years since for my rash absoluteness! No day passed that I did not in my heart unspeak my spiteful petulance a dozen ways. Two years lost between us already! With every life uncertain enough but a Nuncio's doubly unsure . . . it had begun to seem possible that we would never meet again, my precious son and I.

And here now offered itself this irreproachably fortuitous turning of my professional fortunes, that would allow me to seek out Persander at last—to tell him without deceit that chance had brought me near him, and that my grieving heart had taken me the final steps, and here I was to unsay my hard words, and embrace my precious child again.

"Well, who might this client be precisely," I inquired blandly, "and what would she have conveyed, and whither?"

"Seemly a dame lately widowed and wanting her mate's remainders took acrosst country to be tombed in that particular one of the spidergod's temples as he was whelped and raised nigh. Seemly he was pious in the A'Rakishite warshup and rittles an such-lot, while this widow dame, to hear my clan-sister tell it, is quite the agnosticator and unbeliever—as indeed 'tis noised that most Hagish folk are, beyond the formalities."

"The husband is already deceased?" I asked carefully.

"Yes indeed."

"And . . . embalmed, or the like?"

"Boxed and 'balmed. Him in his coffin just need wheeling cross-country and tucking in one of them temple nooches."

"She's . . . sent word rather far abroad, hasn't she, and will have been waiting quite some time before we could possibly arrive to—"

"Well she *trusts* this gossip of hers that's clan-sister of mine, now doesn't she? And on our side, as she trusts a clan-sister, we want her to have a first-water Nuncio, don't we, as the A'Rakish wolds don't lack in danger now and again, do they?"

Though it seemed an odd sort of commission, I accepted it pending my crew's approval, which I straightway received. My crew—Shinn and Bantril (our pullers on the quickshaw, and our plod drovers on this clanker) and Olombo and Raschle (our men-at-arms)—were as much taken with the stipend as I, and, as crack nuncials tend to be, were unwilling to acknowledge any uneasiness about a risky destination, so they promptly ratified my acceptance. Radax at once presented us with ship money to Hagia, and half the stipend, of which Pompilla—the widow commissioning us—would pay us the rest on our arrival at Big Quay.

I could not help reflecting that Radax had just laid out a very substantial sum from her own pocket, on this distant widow's behalf. For how could this Pompilla have forwarded her own funds to Radax at this stage of her

inquiries? I let the thought go. I had mainly my son on my mind, and this commission created the pretext for seeing him again.

We went down to Lebanoi on the coast, and among that great milltown's thronging wharves, found a caravel cargoed with casks and tuns of pickled polyp and marinaded bi-valves, bound to Hagia by way of the Hydrobani Archipelago, at whose raft towns stopovers by out-bound bottoms are common. Shipmasters have found that a hard go at drinking and gambling settles a crew down for long hauls, the more if they have been picked clean and put doubly in need of their pay. We made Glamara, grandest of all the Hydrobani's floating shearing pens, by nightfall, when its colored lights dapple the soft swells it rides, and its timbers reverb like a vast complex drum with the clamors and capers of fevered fools vying to be fleeced. Glamara, when last I'd heard, was where my Persander had 'prenticed himself.

Our shipmaster, Plectt, who struck me as rather a cynic and dandy—though polished enough—suggested the glyfrig and runeriddle parlors. "A young blade carving a niche, Nuncio—if I may express it so?—if he is bold and sharp-witted, works the glyfs or the runes, where they'll give him a pit of his own and a cut of the table to lure in the talent."

I was supping some wine, a practice I'm little given to, but I intended it as a precaution to maintain affability. To betray my contempt for this place would be to assure my inquiries met only rebuff, and the mere sight of those gaudy-lanterned laneways where the raucous toppers reeled tipsily from den to den, made me grit my teeth in scorn. My crew seemed annoyingly inclined to hang about me, meanwhile, making mellowness hard to maintain.

"Won't you all go and . . . game or whatever?" I burst out at them. "Leave me to concentrate! If you spot him, come and tell me—I'll be working straight west down yon largest promenade, the glyfrabble and runewreckers lairs first. What do you need that for, Raschle?!" I noticed that Raschle had wrapped a cubit of log-chain round his forearm and covered it with his sleeve. I'd just previously seen Olombo tuck an ironwood short-knout in his

breech-waist, and a brass knuckle-frame in his pocket. The two of them traded a quick, hooded glance, and shrugged. My wiry pullers, Bantril and Shinn, glum, short-spoken men of the tundra stock, turned away when I looked at them. Had Bantril there strapped something to his ribs beneath his doublet? "Will you all leave me to collect myself, please?" I cried. "To concentrate?"

I watched them go. They seemed to confer before diverging in pairs to either side of the boulevard, and leaving my view.

I quaffed one more goblet of wine. I sighed. Unclenched my hands. I practiced some affable smiles, which I hoped would facilitate my inquiries in this city of scoundrels. Then I set forth.

The boulevard was an endless procession of lounges and parlors and lairs all tiaraed and spangled in lamps—their mere monikers galled me: The Gilded Palm, Odds Bodikins, Pelf's Paradise, The Portly Poke, The Deck and Die. Smiling affably, I asked passers-by which were the glyf-trick and rune-swindle dens, and was answered with japes and affronts.

Stepping in this place and that, I amiably conferred with various greeters and doorkeepers: with pomaded panders, mustachioed shills, rouged catamites in kohl and ringlets, powdered ponces, and leering ganymedes—for whose facetious impertinences I thanked them, smiling affably.

At length I learned to descry—through street windows—the red felt tables for rune play, and the racked arrays of glass statuettes that were glyfs. Now, speaking less, I hunted through the dens themselves, overstepping here the vomitus of a gamester overtaken by surfeit, sidestepping there the blind assault of a gamester in fury, or ducking under the wild, begging embrace of a gamester just ruined.

Until, wonderfully, there he was, my son, at a rune table, suavely directing the coins his ring of bettors vied to place. My dear, grave Persander, look at him: coolth itself amid chaos he was, his shoulders at last their full breadth now (my father's shoulder's, as I had foreseen, not *his* father's)—his brows' brooding jut in place too now, giving his eyes the shadowed private look I'd

long seen they'd grow to. And his ears! The last of that dear, boyish blatancy was gone now. They hugged his head sleekly, a man's, my precious little boy's no more!

He saw me, stood staring, then signalled a colleague to stand in for him, and came over to me. His face stayed impassive (already a gambler's) but he walked straight to me and hugged me without hesitation.

I hugged him hard. "My precious son! I've intruded! No! I've inexcusably thrust in, interrupted, embarrassed you. . . ."

"Mother! I *rejoice* to see you. I'm completely delighted!"

And then I could see that I *had* embarrassed him, though he was covering very smoothly. How could this *not* embarrass him? I asked myself, but even so it stung me. He mustn't be pawed by his mother here where he worked his *profession*! Oh heavens forbid! I stood a bit away and smiled as if he were a dear friend. It felt false and I felt miserable, but also a mite irritated now. "We are commissioned to North Hagia, our carrack put in here. I had to see you and to . . . show you my affection."

"North Hagia? Big Quay?" He seemed to disapprove. It irked me, seemed mere contrariety. Belatedly I saw it was the A'Rak, the danger he minded. It made me glad. I was starting to reassure him when a big, ruddy fop in wide fleecy muttonchops and a toga of silver fur placed a proprietary palm on my son's shoulder. "Riddler! I have *coin* here, Sirrah, riding on your felt! I'm *engaged* and I'm not having riddlers switched on me, do you think me an *infant*? That I don't *know* it's bad luck? If you are indeed employed here, come get thee back to work!"

"Sir," said Persander coolly, gracefully lifting the man's hand from his shoulder with one twist of his wrist, "you are incorrect, and impo—"

"Impolite," he was undoubtedly going to say. I afterwards recalled in perfect detail that moment when I interrupted, and did the unforgivable for a mother—stepped in to defend my son, as if he couldn't do it himself! I tried to stand still, stay silent, and almost managed, but when my son

addressed this flatulent money-sack as "Sir," my outrage wouldn't stay down.

I cut Persander off, stepping up to the gamester: "How could he think *you* to be an infant?" I asked him as loudly as possible, "A big, oily, odorous rump of roast such as yourself? If you are so desperate to disgorge your coin, go and dump it in the jakes, man! You look doubtful but trust me—the notion's just new to you. Try it, and you'll love it! You're moron enough to love gaming, are you not?"

"How dare you, you abusive bitch! I won't stand for *this*!" The cry was the cue for the oaf's retainers, no less than three hefty knout-and-dirk veterans, and they trotted forth.

At this point things converged, and the situation instantly bloomed into a disaster. Persander, dropping suavity, shouted, "Stand them down!" and cleared the hilts of his shortsword, discreetly strapped crosswise against the small of his back. Too late, for here out of nowhere—how did they happen to be here?—were Raschle and Olombo convergent on the knoutsmen, and Bantril and Shinn emerging miraculously from somewhere behind me, closing on them as well. The den's own thumpers, meanwhile, were closing round us almost as quickly.

Thanks to the tranquillizing effects of sudden collision, the brawl was resolved well short of blades. The sum of it was that the gamester's retainers had between them, at a guess, a round dozen broken ribs, their toga-ed rump roast had a lovely plump purple face I'd fisted him, and, unfortunately, Raschle had a broken arm. Our nuncial status spared us detention for damages. Enough that we were marched under arms back to Plectt's ship, which set sail under compulsion a few hours after. What ensued for Persander I knew would be severe professional embarrassment at the very least. The fracas divided us and we had no further moment together.

We set Raschle down at Kadastra in the Aristoz Chain, the western boundary of the Shallows—saw him lodged and leeched till we came back for him. In Hagia we must hire a spear to be at strength for our commission.

We crossed the eastern Agon in a tennight, and my bitter self-reproach and sadness made it a dreary crossing for me.

Shipping bound up the Haagsford River lies at anchor near her estuary and waits till sunrise brings the prevailing onshore breezes that offer easy conveyance inland to Big Quay. When our caravel hoisted sail we made part of a pretty little flotilla of vessels moored before the rivermouth—the gamut of Southern Agon merchantmen we seemed: aft of us, a brace of little Samadrian caiques, big-ruddered with lateens of bossed hide, running leather goods, likely; off our bows a great wallowing galliot, high-castled fore and aft, an Ingens bulk freighter shipping—who knew?—anything suited to warehousing till a rise in prices; the high-riding schooner at point of the pack, with her tall tiers of swollen sail, had likely traversed the open Agon (whose crazed gales she was rigged for) and if from Kairnheim, her cured beeves were likely discharged back in the Ephesions, and she came to Big Quay to fill her hold with something warehoused there; in the main, the smaller fry—a half dozen frigillae, yare as water-skaters; a triad of Pythnian curvottes, their bowsprits carven in the nefrits, spaalgs and djoons of traditional Astrygal iconography—carried, as our own grocer did, consumables to bustling Big Quay's populace. The grander craft came on business from half the world away, and great fortunes in a dozen nations rode with them.

The river, abloom with our sail, swept in long, stately reaches all gilded with morning, and the country was piled up in lovely, green-brocaded hills on either bank. Beneath all this beauty, though, I was already feeling a stirring and twitching—like a venomous something you suddenly sense shares the bedclothes you've just snuggled under.

I chided myself I had known Hagia's history, as most do. Why was I suddenly fastidious? Is not a Nuncio unlike all others in having particularly *sworn* ". . . to honor the custom, the canon, the creed of all peoples whose soil I tread upon . . ."?

Portly shipmaster Plectt—whose oiled ringlets and groomed, perfumed chinlet of beard had delayed me but briefly from developing quite an

affection for—slouched at the port rail beside me. "Your teeth are on edge, my dear Nuncio."

"What?"

"Those two little knots of muscle declare your jaw to be politely but definitely clenched."

"Well, I'm . . . anxious perhaps. . . ."

"Dear Lagademe. You are the most upright, excellent, and intransigent of women! The bare thought of this nation's gods revolts you. But wait and watch. You have not yet begun to abhor. Just past this next bend here. . . ."

Big Quay's name was, for most of its history, a gross overstatement, of course. Time out of mind it had been a rural backwater, the terminus of three convergent inland highways, where the gleets-wool from a number of Hagia's countless inland valleys naturally concentrated before shipment abroad—and not far abroad—to the neighboring Astrygals, mainly. Ambitious locals had built a few "warehouses," big sheds of plank and shingle, no more. These shed owners, a bumpkin elite, dabbled in buying the shearings they stored, and brokering lots off-season, but they seldom did more than break even at best. Now we rounded that bend, and I confronted what those plank sheds, and little docking piers on crooked pilings, had grown to.

A tumult of looming structures it was, an extravagant abundance of architecture. The effect was heightened by the strict niche the city's civic core nested in, for Big Quay was backed by a wall of crags, and stood snugly bracketed between these and the river, as thronged with masts and sail as the city was with steeples and domes, pylons and porticoes, pinnacles, turrets and towers. Their density gave all those grand and individually impressive buildings an air of competitive jostling, of standing on their toes to be seen. The quay, two miles long, was a rampart of massive, seamlessly masoned ashlar, fronted by a phalanx of imposing warehouses of the same costly stone. This quay—a Big Quay in truth today—was like a second river of sailors and teamsters and navvies and

merchants and factors and freightwagons and cargo cranes . . . for all I could see of its length, every foot of the grand wharfside swarmed.

Big Quay was rightly enough named now, past a doubt, now in its Age of Gold, its Age of A'Rak.

Plectt espied his grocers' factor; the man flourished two signal flags bearing the house's blazon (a loaf and sausage, *en gardant*), to mark the berth secured us, whence another carrack—riding high and unladen—was just then being towed out to open water by the little galleys—abristle with oars—locally known as dockers.

In this last little interval before I set foot in the metropolis, I found I could imagine quite clearly that little, early-days Big Quay, all weeds and weathered wood. How had it been on that fateful day near two centuries ago, when that monstrous being had first revealed himself, and proposed his epochal Covenant to those rustics with their few sheds of wool? Just how had that awesome colloquy come upon them, those homely entrepreneurs in fleeces and jerked mutton? Spiderthought is directly *known*, not heard; it comes rippling right up one's spine. Had Grandfather A'Rak crept near in the night, crouched watching and weighing them a while . . . ? Spied on them counting their stock, securing their flimsy doors against night . . . ?

It now seems clear that from the first the A'Rak had been bargaining for security in the long term. Sly puppeteer, from the outset he'd seen how to conjure a populous nation from a sleepy pastoral people—how to swell the size of his flock, generation after generation. *Gentlemen . . . Gentlemen, do not be alarmed. I am A'Rak, a visitor to your lovely hills. Did you know that beneath them, I have found many rich veins of purest gold . . . ?*

The widow Pompilla was to meet us on the Quay in front of the Maritime Museum, and here Plectt, when his crew had his cargo's offloading well in hand, conducted us. We, with our quickshaw in tow, would be known to our client before she to us, and accordingly we made ourselves visible, but a half hour's self display amid the morning throng produced no Dame Pompilla in widow's weeds. For a twenty-night running she had engaged to

be standing the watch here on the morning's dockings, the herb-haag had told us, and we were here within three days of term.

"Leave your men here, Lagademe. I'll show you the Fane," offered Plectt. This seemed needful, some sense of the cult our commission involved us with. I did not wish our point of delivery to be the first A'Rak-temple I'd ever stepped into. The temple here of course was the grandest of all of them, and the one where we were to lodge the deceased was an outlying, more rural shrine, but all the fanes had in common the occasional presence of the A'Rak, or of one of his numberless spawn, and I felt the need to have some sense of what that meant.

The way to the A'Rak Fane lay up towards the foot of the crags, the city's civic and fiscal core. The broad boulevard we followed was fronted with shops whose opulence ascended with the slope, while the grand homes of prospering merchants yielded to the manses of magnates and the Count Houses and 'Changes with their pilastered and friezeworked facades and their traffic of phaetons jockeyed by liveried lackeys, disgorging—amidst flurries of footmen—peruked financiers.

The A'Rak-Fane seemed more stronghold than temple, a mighty octagon in plan, a faceted dome of massy stone—except for great eight-sided windows of dark-tinted glass, set high in each facet of the walls. Its entry yawned between huge pylons, the massy doors—bas-reliefed brass—standing open. Plectt stopped just short of the doors, and embraced me farewell. "I'm back to the Shallows this same noontide."

"You won't show me inside?"

He glanced at the yawning doors with a grimace of loathing. "I'm ignorant of the cult, by choice. What they call the altar, you know . . . it's a pit. The mouth of a shaft." He gave a comic shudder. "The god, you see, or one of his many spawn, can actually attend his service—could *emerge*, don't you see, should he choose. It's not done, of course, as a rule . . . but I never go in, the bare idea repels me. Goodbye my dear, upright Lagademe, noblest of Nuncios!"

Seen from inside, those grand windows were wheels of murky red, black, and amber; they filled the great domed space with a sanguinary gloom, complicated by diaphanous silken hangings that made a labyrinth of the interior; though transparent, the silks lent a wavery, visionary ambiguity to the sanctum, whose great wheel of pews gently vortexed down to a raised dais at its hub. From the atrium just within the brazen doors, my eyes were just level with the top of that dais, where some half-dozen priestly figures (their common feature of costume a white silken shawl fringed with dangling silken braids) stood symmetrically arrayed round the platform's rim. All of them faced the center of the dais, while one standing foremost—in leathern headgear octagonally tiaraed—intoned incomprehensible liturgy. Their gazes were bent, and their chief's intonations were directed, downwards, towards the stone they stood on, where I could now envision what I could not see from my vantage, the "altar" that was the mouth of a shaft.

The pews were mostly empty. There were perhaps some hundred folk scattered among them. It occurred to me that this murky, webby interior was meant to soften an emptiness that was probably more the rule than the exception here. The ceremony didn't lack impressiveness. The chief priest's intonations were blurred by echoes, but the echoes could be heard falling away deep underground where the gods laired, and this lent the liturgy a most somber gravity.

I began to step down a little deeper into the pews, and just as I did so the priest's voice seemed to falter, and his posture, for several heartbeats, seemed paralyzed. A quietly dramatic moment, I found it, and when his voice resumed there was a quaver in it that seemed to say something had changed in this vast vaulted interior. Indeed, was there not a most subtle tingle of presence now, in the air around me? Weren't the sparse congregation faintly stirring, sensing the same?

In the end, I could not be sure, and a moment more saw the service concluded. The little troop of priests filed down the stairs off the dais, and thence up the aisle, their passage sending a gentle swell, like soft breathing, up through the gauzy silk dangling around them and caressing their

shoulders. I retired to a coign of the atrium, out of the way of the dispersing worshippers (prosperous looking burghers, in the main) to watch the priests pass nearer at hand.

It was thus I chanced to witness something that piqued my curiosity extremely. The chief priest stationed himself near the great doors, and urbanely murmured to those of his congregation who paused to murmur some parting exchange. I thought the atrium vacant when, at last, the priest turned away toward a corridor that appeared to lead to an annex of sacerdotal apartments. But just as the priest vanished into this corridor, a tall, lean figure of decidedly undevout appearance stepped soft-footed out from behind a pillar: bony-face, broken-nosed, black hair clubbed in thongs down his back (up from which peeked a sword-pommel—a three-quarters blade, no doubt, hid in his doublet), this lanky shape lithely and soundlessly followed the priest into the corridor, out of my sight.

The more keenly my curiosity gnawed at me—and I stood there unable to move for the longest time—the more sternly did my Nuncial duty upbraid me. Our commission, half paid in advance, commanded my fullest energies on the instant. If a Nuncio is anything, she is someone who does *not* step aside from appointed paths—someone whom the seduction of branchings and by-ways can *never* beguile. Sternly remembering myself, then, I went to rejoin my crew.

|

NIFFT I

I am sure you are familiar with the tradition, Dear Shag, that Grandfather A'Rak, and all his issue, great and small, instantly know thieves for what they are—can *smell* them, is the common expression, which I for one find offensive. Who knows by what arcane sensitivity these alien beings identify the members of my guild?

But that they in fact do so is disputed by no one. When the Hagian octaloon began circulating, minted from the A'Rak's mines (in which the budding human elite he was grooming always owned shares, to be sure) it quickly became the preferred coinage throughout the southern Agon, and its allure brought the best builders from abroad to assist in the new city's birth. But outgoing gold makes no nation rich. When foreign wealth learned it had no safer haven than the vaults of the A'Rak's monastia, only then began Big Quay's real greatness.

Where else were hoards of coin more direly guarded than here, where thieves encountered instantaneous apprehension? Big Quay, midway between the Ephesions and the Ingens Cluster, is perfectly sited as an entrepot, and as speculation in her warehoused cargoes thrived, the speculators lodged their capital in the monastia, whose letters of draught and notes of deposit quickly became as good as gold half the world over.

The monastia, monkish cloisters on the face of them, were an instance of the spidergod's ever-canny cloaking of his fiscal webwork in the pious garb of his cult; the cloisters were fortressed vaults, in fact, and their comfortably maintained inhabitants functioned as the clerks and directors of any banking house function.

That the monastia should be my chief interest in Big Quay perhaps scarcely needs saying. What induced me to attempt them—or even to come near them with an attempt in mind—is best grasped through this narrative's unfolding. A monastial vault was in any case a long-odds prize at the best,

and in the short term I aimed at a more modest profit, while maintaining a wait-and-see view towards the greater.

The great question, of course, was the *how* of the A'Rakspawn's spotting of thieves. Needless to say, the spiderkind don't traffic openly about. Discretion is the keynote of their dominion in Hagia. Save for the yearly Choosing on Shortest Night (as will shortly appear) they confine their feeding to the countryside well away from the metropolis. It seemed certain a thief could go safe enough amid Big Quay's throngs. The presence there, indeed, of great merchants and financiers, trafficking freely, absolutely assured this.

The difficulty was, the first little profit I aimed at involved selling *to* Grandfather A'Rak himself a certain article I'd acquired by chance. Clearly, I was in double need of a proxy—not merely to avoid being devoured on the spot, before my proposition was even out of my mouth, but to gain audience with the Great Sire himself in the first instance.

The flagship shrine, so to speak, among the A'Rak's temples was the Big Quay Fane, and its Ecclesiarch was the Primate among all A'Rak's priests. Plainly, this prelate was my only possible intermediary. A new man had but lately succeeded to the Ecclesiarchal Chair, one Paanja Pandagon. The gossip reported him somewhat young for the post; he would in any case be unseasoned to it. The circumstance seemed more auspicious than otherwise, given the unprecedented nature of what I had come a-peddling.

It was the Ecclesiarch, then, whom the Nuncio Lagademe spied me a-spying on. I had debarked the same morning as she, and had gone straight to work. As I had sat in the pews, much nearer the dais than she, I was close when that faltering moment came upon the Ecclesiarch. I could just see his brow (well tanned) break a sweat, and his hands tremble, before he clenched and stilled them. And I wondered the less at these things, because I also perceived an unearthly, outwelling energy invisibly fountaining up from the dais he stood on. Others in pews as near as mine felt it too—they glanced at, and then hid their eyes from each other, and shrank down in their seats.

It was no sooner felt than it ended, this eerie efflux, but I knew in that instant it was aimed, was addressed to the priest in particular, and I didn't wonder that he trembled.

Still shaken afterwards, he was the easier to follow unseen (I too was shaken, I think, to miss the Nuncio watching us both!)—down a corridor through an annex of sacerdotal chambers. He turned into a doorless ward-room that was antechamber to his own quarters. The look in his eyes was remote. He transferred his diademed chaplet from his head to a perruquier's block affixed to the wall, and draped his shawl on a tailor's mold next to it. Now I stood unconcealed in the doorway, but he turned toward his chamber, still unseeing.

"Honored Ecclesiarch," I said gently, "may I speak with you?"

He turned—a lean, handsome man in his early middle years, startlement sparking anger in his eye, but his breeding apparent in his swift self-repossession. "I know I intrude inexcusably," I bowed, "but as you are the A'Rak's chief minister, and I have learned of some danger to the god, I have risked rudeness to do you the sooner a great service."

"You have learned of a *danger* to the god . . . ?" He echoed me, his grey eyes amazed . . . and something more than amazed? Did I detect even then a fore-tremor of . . . hope? None he could admit to himself at this point, surely. On balance, alarm seemed to dominate. He ushered me into his chamber and bolted his door. From a carafe on his desk he unlimbered two goblets of light morning wine. We sat and we sipped. He studied me, politely but gravely.

"Let me," I offered, "bluntly encounter your doubts, and set forth my business. I am Nifft the Ephesionite, but of transient life many long years now, a soldier for hire, in the main; I have known rigors, and, now and again, sordid circumstances, but I am honest in my dealings, and in letters, more learned than most.

"So. What I bring you, I hope to be paid for, though what sum, if anything, I leave in your hands to determine, as my news, for aught I know, is known

to you, or is plain fraud to your better-schooled eyes, or is worthless for some other cause I know not of."

Here I drew forth the worn and smudged parchment I had carried so far, displaying but not tendering it yet. "I bring you this torn penny ballad sheet I found in a jumble-shop on Yonder Meerbog, one of the western Minuskulons. As you will see if you buy it of me, it is fragmentary. There are four quatrains, but only the first line of a fifth. And given the common size of a ballad sheet, I think we are probably several verses short of the whole here. By its style of scribework I judge it of Kolodrian origin, but make no claim to know.

"You must understand, though, that this sheet by itself might never have brought me here. But some two or three months after I acquired this, in the course of my crossing the Shallows—an unhurried, wandering sort of crossing, you understand—I winded a most persistent rumor abroad, concerning your nation. The gist of it was, that before much more time has passed, the vault-doors of North Hagia will hang open and unguarded."

"You heard this from more than one source, you say?" Courtesy vied with impatience in Paanja Pandagon's eyes as he asked this. *Rumors*.

"In Lulume I overheard two old stevedores trading it. In a Lebanoi tavern a polyp factor at the table next mine murmured it to his sister, a harlot. On a charter barque bearing gamesters to Glamara, I eavesdropped on some thieves in their cups, and heard one tell another the same. Rumors, Ecclesiarch, provided one knows how to sift them aright, are History happening."

"You are right, of course. `The vault doors of North Hagia will hang open and unguarded. . . .' It is . . . ominous, to be sure. Well, shall I, then . . . ?" He gestured for the verses.

The verses on the vellum sheet I gave him were these:

* * *

Let the A'Rak's web be woven,
the ghost-web he's been wont to weave
of souls torn from bodies cloven
by his fangs that all things cleave.

Let him slay and slay and tear them,
souls alive from bodies slain,
let him weave those ghosts and wear them—
for one doth come to work him pain!

Heap the smoking meat thou'st plundered,
weave the soul-stuff, weave it strong!
for such soul-stuff can't be sundered
and thoul't need its shield ere long!

When thou'rt clothed in slaughter's garment
wilt thou not be bravely clad?
Staunch the fabric spun from torment,
and bright the dyes by victims bled!

But 'ware that *thou* be not the garment—

Gravely, Pandagon read and re-read these lines, and at length gave that little lift of the shoulders that shrugs off a faint qualm of unease. "In the main, its meaning is dark to me, but the sneer in it, the mocking and threat . . . it is most disturbing."

"It is dark to me too, Ecclesiarch. Struggling for its meaning, I find almost nothing. I have heard, associated with the rumors, a name: Pam'Pel. But its connection with these verses is unknown to me. The best I can surmise is that it is related to those wee-known lines from Targvad: `. . . till his undying hunger was driven to flee/By the scourge of a foe more immortal than he. . . .' "

"Yes. . . . Do you know, honest Nifft, that I was invested with this priestly dignity only last autumn?"

"I did hear your appointment was recent."

"The fact is that in the normal cycle of affairs, even the holder of my post—that is to say, the chief prelate of our national faith—even the Ecclesiarch of this our primary fane. . . . But forgive me. I hope that if I speak in a personal vein, I will not be imposing on your patience? You have perhaps some business which—"

"I am honored, Ecclesiarch, to share your thoughts, and keenly interested besides, I assure you."

"Well then, direct intercourse with the A'Rak is far from frequent, even for the holder of my post. At the Choosing on Shortest Night—but two days off, of course—I anticipated my first such moment of direct communion with my great patron, for he addresses the whole assembly on that solemn occasion; however, a communication particularly directed to myself, even at the Choosing, is by no means certain. But now I truly know myself Ecclesiarch past doubting—I find, you see, that I had not fully grasped, even with all my misgivings, the responsibility I have assumed. This very hour, at morning Eulogy, the god directly addressed me from the altar's deeps. He commanded me to attend him tonight, alone, up in the Arena. The annals of our faith record no previous summons of this kind."

I showed him I felt the awe of it, but I didn't speak, sensing he would say more in my silence, because it was his own thoughts he was trying to discover. "The moment I felt the god's presence retire, I experienced the oddest rush of memories—so long unrecalled that their clarity quite stunned

me. I remembered a seashore outing when I was quite small, something big and dark tiptoeing out of the surf, all dripping with foam, and myself beginning to call the others to look, and being snatched up double quick, and hustled inside our circle round the fire, and told to look at the flames and nowhere else; then I recalled myself as an older boy, at a cousin's funeral party, the deceased not to be viewed as he had been god-taken, but myself sneaking back to the room where his family's senior women were winding him, and glimpsing before I was hustled away just one of his hands stiffly protruding from the shroud, the hand a knot of stark bone and tendon in skin like black leather; later, when I was a youth in a country ride with my friends, when one of us outriding went into a coppice, we heard his mount shrilling and he screaming, and the lot of us stunned, shamefaced, mouthed the god's name one to another in whispers, and turned home sadly to tell his parents . . ."

The silence he came to seemed haunted, so I gently prompted him, "I don't understand this of the seashore."

"A'Rak and his spawn, though not expert swimmers, can hunt seafloor and riverfloor. They take care not to lay the burden of their appetites on any single species, you see."

I longed then to ask what most foreigners do—the size of the spider-kin's annual harvest of human lives. But had the sense not to. Well-watered Hagia's fat, fruitful countryside teems with folk. In any land comparably populous, thousands will vanish—in this way and that way—each year.

But even unspoken that question—the cost in human meat of Hagia's Covenant—hung in the room with us. Now that Pandagon really felt the weight of his post, I guessed that his thoughts at some point contained the reflection that, in a nation of shepherds, the Ecclesiarch here was himself the arch-shepherd of the Spider-god's human flocks.

By whatever vague intuitions, I sensed that here was a man whose attitude toward his public post was far from predictable. He was, I recalled hearing, from some genteelly declined branch of a House still great in the Big Quay

oligarchy of Old Money, and his appointment was the by-blow of political jockeying among that set. Pandagon was a political nobody whose choice slighted no important faction, and so he had been named by the City's Docksmeister, who mayored the town and always needed Old Money majorities behind him to keep his post.

As I've noted, Paanja Pandagon had that amiable, untargeted manner of those raised in comfortable circumstances amidst that absence of urgencies that money brings. Yet an ardor lurked in him too, an ambition, but an ambition, I sensed, of the cultivated kind, for honor, for heroic service. Now, having wandered vaguely to this pass in his life's genteel aimlessness, he found that what proved to be a frightening power had been offhandedly placed in *his* hands. Here he was the spidergod's First Officer among all the god's human congregation. He was stunned, of course, at heart, struggling to grasp it—but how steadily he bore it! How courteous he was with me, despite the profound ambiguity that undoubtedly shrouded my true motives from his eyes! I found I was starting to like this Paanja Pandagon.

"I will frankly declare a thought," I told him, "which I hope you will take as kindly meant even though, as I fear, it might strike you as offensive. I hope it is not indelicate to wonder, but wonder I must: this rumored peril of the god's, these ballads circulating . . . and this apparently extraordinary summonsing of the Ecclesiarch to a private colloquy. In short: is something stirring?"

"I have only thanks for your candor. I thought it myself, and now feel less foolish to have thought it. You have clearly been much abroad, Nifft. Your views of us from . . . outside, I much relish. Look you now, what of this: come for a swim! What do you say? Come swimming with Minor and me—it is wonderfully refreshing, I swear it! And I would like you to talk with us. I would like Minor to hear at once what you've brought. And as for your remuneration, well, will a twenty weight of gold octals suffice as your fee for this vital intelligence?"

I beamed—who would not? "What a princely sum!" I cried. "Thank you! A swim sounds like a splendid idea!"

* * *

He left me in his study to breakfast on fruit and morning wine. Returning presently, he conducted me through the Fane's sacerdotal annex to an alley that backed it.

"This," he told me by way of introduction, "is Fane Censer Minim, my dear old friend." The man sat the box of a low-slung high-wheeled dasher with a team of three skinnies, a fleet looking little vehicle indeed. I had noticed him officiating at the service, holding a chalice-shaped censer. He turned to give me his hand without dismounting, the reins still gripped in his free hand—a short, dense-bodied man, swarthy, with black hair like short fur. He was polite, and unmistakably disinclined to like me. When I saw him shoot Paanja Pandagon a monitory glance, I knew the man at once. Honest and gloomily inward, his loyalty to his more dashing friend was absolute. He was his friend's watchdog, a practical-minded man who probably felt his friend's only fault was a carelessly generous, undiscriminating spirit that trusted others unwisely.

In consequence, though this Minim, Arch Censer (the post of second power behind the Ecclesiarch's, in fact) looked gloomy enough as I got in, and plainly felt a good day's swim had been spoiled (I had to smile, imagining what his reaction had been when Paanja had blithely recounted the twenty-weight he'd paid me)—in spite or because of the poor solemn fellow's brooding, I found myself rather liking him as well. What is finer, after all, than the unselfishness of loyalty?

Broody he might be, but Fursten Minim well knew how to drive a fine costly dasher like this one. We skimmed and we flew, the team ran their skittery claws up more than one alleyway wall when he lashed us through high, fast corner-turns. Monumental Big Quay, full of structures in pompous scale, was full of back-alleys serving these edifices' hindsides for their mundane deliveries and dispatchings of services. Minim, with many a veer and a vectoring, ferreted us through a chain of these near-empty alleys, our wheelrims skating off sparks from the cobbles and flags as often as not, and brought us in a thoroughly exhilarated mood to the downstream corner

of Big Quay. Here the sheer crags that backed the city closely approached the riverbank, tapering the city's southern edge almost to a point. Downstream of this point, there was just enough negotiable river margin to support the South Path, a twisting gravelled road suitable only for light conveyances. Here Minim slowed to a walk, and I joined him and Paanja in quietly savoring the vista of the river so closely flanking us, past a thin marge of boulders and trees.

"How often we sneaked into Chancel a half hour late," exclaimed the Ecclesiarch, "Nimmy and I, young scoundrels in the Academy together—how often we sneaked in wet-eared and late, from stealing down here to swim after sevenses? Not truth?"

"Truth," Minim said seriously. They spoke of the "Academy," where, as in most such incubaria of wealth, rank prevailed. Minim was mighty in family rank, but was ugly and utterly without presence. Young Pandagon's flair, contrariwise, won only jeers, because of the genteel poverty of his family connections. Both were social outcasts, then, as it happened, but their bond was not sealed until, one day when Paanja happened to be off on a ramble, he came across two larval oligarchs thrashing young Minim. Unhesitant, he pounced, and pummeled them bloody and senseless, and from this generous act, two half-brothers were born, so to speak.

My private thought was that in that encounter the ardent Paanja had found his moment, his self—here was dangerous, disinterested Good to be done! It was hard not to like the pair of them, in sum, and it grieved me to reflect that perhaps these two excellent fellows, in the course of what might be coming, would stand in grave danger indeed.

We left the path for a cluster of boulders, where there were smooth surfaces and pockets of sunwarmed sand. When we had stripped, it appeared how muscled and honed Pandagon kept himself, and I knew I had read him aright, for his body declared his ambition. Minim looked askance at my advancing to the water still wearing my back-rigged baby broadsword.

"Is the weapon wise?"

"Oh, no harm, thank you. Sheath's packed with brazzwax and skanx oil."

"I mean, it will cumber you."

"Not at all, thanks. Discomfort will be slight, beside the comfort of having it handy."

"I assure you, where we swim it's wide and deep, and there's nothing dangerous. Out in the estuary are concentrated the only dangerous flora or fauna in our—"

"Forgive me, Minim. Bluntly, I am obligated by a private vow to myself, never to find myself swordless where a need might arise. I don't intend any insult to your river. Allow an anxious traveller his odd charms and rites."

"Nimmy lay off our friend!" cried Pandagon. "Manners! Let's hit the water, lads! In!"

How like a schoolboy he still was, this head priest of all North Hagia! Yet the river was indeed glorious. Its wide flux was all hammered pewter, sunpricked with sapphire and silver, and diving into the broad, smooth surge of its flowing coolth felt like having ten years of age skinned off me in a single slash. We porpoised up new-fleshed into the morning light.

"We ride downstream just a ways," called Paanja Pandagon, "then we steady-stoke against the current, then when we're breathed and limbered, we swim back upstream."

Slice it however, I disliked swimming naked in dark water in the spidergod's country. I was a while forgetting the tickle of nasty possibilities against my footsoles.

But at length, forget I did. Hagia, heaped green and bosomy to either side of the wide, silver waterway—she was fair for all her failings! Never again do I expect to see such lush beauty made the theater of such an ugly Death as was soon to hold sway here.

This sustained, methodical swimming against the current was an inspired means of turning brute exercise into recreation. We were all working away, well spread, each privately savoring his task, when Minim surprised me by declaiming quite impressively, spacing their rhythm to his labor's, a quatrain of the pennysheet verses I'd just sold to Paanja.

"Let the A'Rak's . . . web be woven . . . that ghost web he . . . was wont to weave . . . of souls torn from . . . bodies cloven . . . by his fangs that . . . all things cleave!"

"Did you know it already . . . that ballad, good Minim?"

"I'm just a quick study. . . . but what could it *mean*?. . . . Does it mean *any*thing? . . . No offense."

"None taken!. . . . Of course you doubt! . . . I approached you . . . for profit! . . . But *I* didn't write it! . . . I don't *know* what it means . . . It sounds very much . . . like a *threat* though . . ."

We swam then in silence. Never could I have believed I could find such physical pleasure in the waters of a land so deeply wormholed and blighted with horror beneath its fair surfaces! When we climbed out at last, we were laughing like youths at inane jollities, merely glad at our strength and refreshment and the glory of the sun on the green hills around us. We each found a big, comfy, sunwarmed boulder to lie on. The sun lavished light on us like a largess of gold coin. I felt the happy moment was, distinctly, an omen. If I survived, my enterprise here was meant to bathe me in gold.

But at length our silence grew tenser with unspoken thoughts of the problems at hand, until at last Paanja said, "Speak it out for us, Nimmy. Let us hear the lines again."

And Minim recited them without preamble. Just at the first, it seemed he wanted to put a burlesque solemnity in his rendering, to parody the lines, but his voice soon turned grave:

Let the A'Rak's web be woven
that ghostweb he was wont to weave
of souls torn from bodies cloven
by his fangs that all things cleave!

Let him stab and slay and tear them,
souls alive from bodies slain.
Let him weave those ghosts and wear them—
for one doth come to work him pain.

Heap the smoking meat thou'st plundered!
Weave, oh A'Rak! Weave it strong!
for such web can scarce be sundered,
And thou'lt need its shield ere long!

When thou'rt clothed in Slaughter's garment.
Wilt thou not be bravely clad?
Staunch the fabric spun from torment,
And bright the dyes by victims bled!

But 'ware that *thou* be not the garment. . . ."

* * *

Our after-silence rang with one question: The garment of *whom*? The poetic fragment was as obscure to me as to them, whatever gleanings of legend and vague conjectures I might bring to bear upon the lines.

"It would be madness," Minim flatly declared, "to share these verses with the deity tonight—to associate yourself in any way with verses which embody an unmistakable threat to him."

"I won't pretend, Nimmy, that I yet know what I am going to do. It all hangs upon what he's called me up to the Stadium for. It has occurred to me that if rumors are abroad, and the god has winded them, then it might be dangerous to *conceal* these verses from him. I must weigh this a while."

No doubt he must. For me, it was time to arrange my lodging and begin finding my way about. I rose, and shrugged into my doublet. "You have shown me such hospitality," I told them. "This swim has been pure delight, and it seems ill bred to take short leave. But you two must take counsel, and I have planned a tourist's amble about your lovely countryside. May I come see you in two or three days, and perhaps learn what you have learned of the, ah, deity's communications—barring impropriety, of course?"

"You will be welcome, and warmly, Nifft," beamed Paanja Pandagon. Fursten Minim bowed graciously, though his look was much more reserved. The Ecclesiarch produced a vellum chit. "Convey this card of mine . . . to the Weskitt and Fobb, an elegant hostelry near 'Change Row. You will be entertained as my guest."

Minim's handclasp was politely firm. His eyes were still distrusting, though they perhaps looked less sure of what they doubted in me.

In sum, I set out feeling content with my new acquaintance, and in general, well launched. It was already midday. Now I would bathe and dine at the Weskitt and Fobb. Early on the morrow would be soon enough to commence my reconnaissance of the nearby Monastia, whose renowned architecture I was keen to contemplate.

|

LAGADEME II

Still musing over the curious bit of stalking I had been witness to in the A'Rak Fane, I returned to find my crew, criss-crossing as I went the route by which Plectt had led me to the place. If I was sniffing for anything particular, it was for some sign from these citizens of any such repugnance and unease as troubled me. How could they so casually tread ground that was subterraneously trafficked by such a god as theirs, and his spawn? I suppose my naive thought was that surely some passer or shopkeep, thinking themselves unseen, would let slip a shudder, or that I might spy here or there two cronies guardedly sharing a treasonous murmur of loathing.

But I glimpsed no such thing, not a jot of it. Even thus, they say, in cities near demon-vents, do people walk blandly about their business. My own obligation was plain enough in any case: to take a new grip on my Nuncial dispassion. So resolved, I returned to the quayside fronting the Maritime Museum.

Here were my pullers with the 'shaw, but Olombo was absent. Bantril, fractionally less laconic than Shinn, informed me, "Widow took him that way, said follow with you."

Off we set downquay, the pair threading the high-wheeled 'shaw amidst rattling freight wagons rushing empty from warehouse to waterside for new loads, dodging among the sedans and palanquins of substantial travellers being reverentially conveyed to 'Change Row to wield their fortunes, steering round thickets of stevedores resting where they could best obstruct traffic, darting between maids and housewives a-streaming all parcelled and basketed to and from early market.

"Describe her, our commissioner!" I prompted Bantril as we jog-trotted. "What was she like?"

"Short. All veiled."

"Veils of mourning?"

"Black veils, to the ground."

We neared the Quay's southern end, where the city tapered to a spur as the crags angled to meet the riverside. The last stretch of quay here was a shabby, less trafficked precinct of straggly, unprosperous establishments: weathered plank storage sheds in fenced compounds, that rented lockups for the bags and impedimenta of sailors on shore between berths outbound; bottoms yards where small rental craft were docked: skiffs, yawls, wherries, and caiques; those chandlers' shops for the humbler mariner not above buying used cable or casks, elderly hardbiscuit and jerky, or rusty hoists and tackle already gone to sea; and the sort of little grog sheds where the oldest salts loaf and half-mites of beer are poured and each third grog is free.

My pullers halted at the gate of a bottoms yard. The gate, which opened onto the plankway the rentals were moored to, was locked, and bore the sign:

CLUMMOCKS DOCKING AND BOTTUMS
OURLY TO WEEKLY RAITS.

Through the gate we saw, out at the plankway's end, Olombo standing with a very short-statured figure in black, and with a towering obese figure in a tarry tunic, the eponymous Clummock, I guessed. The small black figure—inevitably our widow Pompilla—exhibited intense agitation, even at a distance. As she addressed the bottoms man, her hands ceaselessly worried and twisted a voluminous black handkerchief whose flutterings seemed a very signal flag of distress—and indeed, the liquidity of the black gauze that so profusely shrouded her likewise semaphored with its bulgings and ripplings that she was passionately imploring, or possibly vilifying, the obese, immobile Clummock. I called out and signalled, and called again before Olombo, who seemed bemused, woke to us, and hastened to let us

in. Leading us back down the plankway, he murmured, "In a great dither, the widow. Our coffin's there . . . moored on that raft? She won't have it lashed on the 'shaw, though. She says it *has* to be rafted upriver before we take to the highway. The raft it's on's rented—brought the casket to town on it, seemingly, from the embalmer. Odd she didn't have him 'balmed here in his hometown, no? Anyway she wants this Clummock to let her take the raft farther upstream on credit, seems she's out of coin. Be calm with her now, Lag, she's a moaner and wailer for sure."

With a smiling salute, I soothed, "Honored Dame! Rest utterly assured, Dear Pom—-"

"Dear Heavens! Dear Nuncio! Oh Horrors! Oh *help*! You must save us, must solve this *disastrous* impasse, *speak* to this fellow, make him *see* how cruel and stiffnecked and *obdurate* of him it is to stand fast on such *trifles*." Sobs clutched her voice. Her face, a vague oval only in the veils, seemed tear-streaked. I shut up and nodded and murmured awhile as she went on thus—she was plainly one of those women who must be allowed to erupt, to explode, an overflowing kind of little woman altogether, even in the superabundant scent of her sachet—nellopilla, lillorish—just those cloying aromatics one associates with a particular breed of over-wrought muddled dame overindulged all her life by a husband who has long stopped listening to her. Our Dame's scent was strong even for her type, faintly dizzying, indeed.

Patiently I endured her effusion of words and aromatics. When a shortage of funds seemed to be her theme, I gently asked if it was the rest of our stipend she lacked. The question seemed to stun her to softness. "Why no," she breathed in wonderment. "Here's your fee here, Dear Nuncio. Take it at once." The money belt paid us in full. I passed it among my crew and we parted it on the spot.

A few careful questions more, one or two outbursts, and clarity at last was achieved, and Dame Pompilla, delivered, stood quietly weeping. The stern-paddle raft bearing the deceased's coffin—an imposing great casket of onyxwood, richly carven—had been hired only as far as its return to its

moorage here. But the widow was urgently insistent on loading our crew and 'shaw on it and taking us a further ten leagues upriver of Big Quay aboard it, before setting coffin and crew ashore to commence the overland journey of delivery. The gist was that Clummock must have three gold octals additional rent on the raft for the twenty leagues extra, while the Widow's whole funeral capital was exhausted by the remittance of the balance of our stipend, which iron nuncial protocol, of course, requires in advance, given the danger of many commissions.

But Hagia had fine, broad smooth-flagged highways in abundance. It might be that going upriver would save some few miles of overland travel, but what did such a trifle matter? We were well paid and glad to run the whole way—to load 'shaw and cross town on the instant, and be miles up the northeast highway by noontide.

Alas, ambiguity and ambivalences haunted the A'Rak's cult. Though entombment in one's native fane was orthodox rite, it was rarely practiced, and more tolerated than fostered by the deity. "I didn't share my lamented Glabron's piety, dear Nuncio," grieved the Dame. "The rituals are all but unknown to me—to many of us here, in truth. Master Clummock, you're as vague on the matter as I, didn't you tell me?"

The huge bottoms man hawked phlegm and spat in the water. "The funeral thing, Dame, I don't know a bit of. I do the required. I went up to the stadium, stood for a Choosing six years back . . . I deem that's enough cult for me, thankee."

"Yes," said the Dame. "But whatever the rules, Dear Nuncio, the heart of it is a long funeral procession like that my beloved Glabrum wished is . . . disliked by the gods as morbid spectacle, don't you see. Coffins passing through villages with the A'Rak's icons engraved on them . . . they arouse somber thoughts. Now, water acts to muffle the A'Rak's otherwise keen sensitivity to whatever treads upon his earth. Only when the wheels of your quickshaw touch earth here will the a'rakspawn clearly sense your sad burden's presence. I'm most anxious to shorten the term of that contact and its irritation to the deity. Indeed, dear Nuncio, I can't pass this topic without

emphasizing to you most *strongly*—" here she leaned near to grip my arm, and a gust of her cachet discomfited me; her grip was surprisingly steely, as her voice seemed so as well, just then. "—*most* strongly stress that you must never allow the casket to fall or even touch the ground directly. Such a grave impiety could bring a visit from one of the deities. . . ."

I disengaged my arm as civilly as I could, but my tone could not hide my sense of affront. "As the cost of our hire might have hinted to you, Dame Pompilla, a Nuncial crew of our calibre are not in the habit of *dropping* their consignments."

"Oh, certainly not my dear, certainly not!" she quavered, once more a-fluttering, so that we all hastened to soothe her, and ask how to solve our impasse.

Clummock still stood firm on his fee. Timidly, then, the widow ventured a possible solution. She revealed that she had just concluded arranging a little commercial transaction in the countryside a half day distant. "I'm to doctor a friend's gleets and be paid with the gravid ewes of the flock; two dozen and more are close to yeaning. With your crew helping, Nuncio, we could have them here mid-morrow, when good Clummock might take some in pay for the raft, and then my lamented husband could be launched, and well forward by nightfall en route to his rest."

"Hap they be thick-fleeced and fat enough, I would," allowed Clummock, regarding the offered ewes.

That a Nuncial crew should go shepherding was ludicrous, of course, an indignity. But, trading looks with my crew, I found grudging assent—eagerness in any case to shorten this humiliating haggle, with our turbulent client working up to a lather at every turn. Our stipend was princely in truth. Let us endure a brief irregularity, then, if it just got us shut of this odorous, clamorous woman, and put highway under our feet at last. This was a commission I wished to put briskly behind us.

All warbling cheer at my acceptance now, the widow led Clummock aside, with some last points to show him about the casket left on his raft. She said

something close to his ear to which he nodded. He sat on the casket. The widow led us away, babbling of our journey, led us out Clummock's gate and locked it behind us. Glancing back as we left I saw Clummock still quietly seated on the coffin, as if he meant to repose there a while longer.

* * *

The North Highway swept us smoothly out through the metropolis' purlieus, where the monumental profile of the city subsided to a sprawl of more modest residences, while the crags swung inland and merged with the green, easy-rolling hills.

The widow Pompilla marched in the lead, a short, peaked heap of black gauze in billowy, unabated motion. I was denied a view of her precise locomotive style, but, short as her legs had to be, her pace and stamina were astonishing. Here, I would have thought, one saw the energy squandered by her emotional eruptions being channeled to useful effort—were it not that *as* she strode tirelessly forth, she *held* forth just as tirelessly, practically ranted in fact, about the countryside we crossed.

"*Hay*-farming!" (This at the first shocks of hay we passed.) "I was a farm girl before I was wed! Helping dear Daddum bind wickers with withes my third year! Milking the gentle eyed momiles, squeezing the gleets' silken teats. The warm milk asteam in the chill of morn! The precious perfumes! The barnyard's pungencies!" And so on.

From raptures about her Hagish childhood, she passed to raptures about Hagish culture. She laid her nativity here on so thick, that under any other circumstances I would have suspected her for the fraud she was, and though I now understand how I was duped, I still cringe with shame to think how I swallowed it all. "Now *that*—look! Look there!" (This was occasioned at the sight of the first rat-rick we passed, whatever that was.) "*That* is a rat-rick of the true Hagish style, the *original*, *native* Hagish style of the *first* Hagish rat-rick riggers! Note the plain, solid capstyle, tented on teepeed poles fanned out to rafter the eaves! In that humble but heartfelt capstyle is Hagish virtue in essence, Hagish—" And so on.

But however much she punished our ears, the solid honorarium in our pokes made us patient with this undeniably grotesque little detour, as did the fact that it gave us a taste of the territory while we were still unyoked to our duty. This highway, for one thing, presaged a swift delivery if all the roads —as they in fact proved to be—were equally well engineered: wide and seamlessly flagged, it attacked slopes in graceful sweeps that eased upgrades and downgrades alike. We soon learned as well the pronounced rhythm of Hagian terrain, whose pattern we grasped when, near noontide, we emerged from the Rattlespate River Valley, crested the ridgeline, and began our descent into the Ebonflux River Valley. Hagia is in fact one vast network of grassy ridgelines—sun-warmed and sparsely treed—and, webbed in the net, a host of lush river valleys thick-forested along their floors.

As with the Rattlespate's, the Ebonflux Valley's upper slopes were nearly all meadows, thicketed here and there with flowering shrubs. Rainy Hagia—we were there in its sole short dry season—is profuse in blossoms: scarlet gleetsbane with pistils like saffron stilettos, the lavender flagons of gnats-nest, the ranked bells of amber carrilion with indigo anthers a-dangle like tongues.

Midway down into the valley, where the slope gentled, the farmsteads began, looking pretty and prosperous, their furrows straight as comb-strokes. From the gables it was the fashion to hang wind-chimes like clouds of butterflies or flights of birds, and fanciful weather vanes were another custom—sheet-copper in artful silhouettes: a milkmaid in windblown dress by a gleet with windblown fleece, a shepherd chasing a tumbling hat, two children struggling to pitch a tent with a wind-tugged blanket.

It came to me then that we had been some hours in progress and that actual children had been little in evidence the whole time. As we at length neared the wooded valley floor, I understood it. The Ebonflux, much broader than the Rattlespate, was flanked by a much denser forest, and entering its fringe we grasped how a Hagian valley's floor could be a world away from its slopes or its ridgelines. Widow Pompilla actually fell silent. As the green gloom roofed us, the prisoning trees crowded closer, and the woven vines

shackled our eyes and ears in whispery shadow and the restless ambiguity of leaf, blade, and frond. We sensed a stir of stealthy habitation coming awake on every side. But of course. These valley-floor woods would be the very heartland of the Covenant. Here could the a'rakspawn walk above-ground almost invisibly. And children throughout the valleys would, in consequence, be close-kept.

As we crossed the Ebonflux on the Cobblestone Bridge, from mid-span I glimpsed pathetic confirmation of my inferences down in the Cobblestone Township, which occupied both banks of the river below. There were modest docks, where shallowdraft gondolas offloaded kegged dairy goods at the Cheese Cooperative, or baled fleeces at the high-beamed Weavery echoing with the clatter and twang of the looms. And down on those docks I glimpsed some schoolmistresses guiding a gaggle of nursery aged children, showing them the shopwindows and the folk a-working. Aged three or four summers, the children were precious, as all such wee pups are the world over, with their solemn wee flowerpetal lips and great, grave eyes. It was only at second look I saw it: bright woolen cords bound these tinies wrist to wrist. They scarce perceived these friendly shackles they wore, such being their custom since cradle-days no doubt, like Ma and Da's countless cautionings never to stray from the path to the undergrowth, as pups like themselves had got vanished forever and ever that way. . . .

We were glad to climb out of the woods, and rise ridgeward again. Our veiled Dame marched in the van quite mute now, and stayed so, till I grew still uneasier about her. Her odd ardors, her sharp alterations! I conceived an irrational anxiety to see her face, as if that by itself could help me decide: was she, quite simply, a plausible madwoman, and her errand with that coffin of hers a lunatic's wild conception?

As the day was declining we branched to a lesser road just short of the ridgecrest, and only then did she speak again. "Now my friend Widow Bozzm, mark you" (as before she still marched as she spoke, though now she faced forward) "is herself new-widowed, lost her dear Haggardham Bozzm, a cheese-meister, but a year gone, and she and her two girls are hard put running the dairy he left them on Buttercrock Creek. In some

work, like milking the momiles and gleets, they're marvels, and the cheesing and churning, but they're all too stout for the shepherding uphill and down. In consequence, their gleets go half-tended, and have now caught the shank-rot. I'll watch the night leeching them, and for my services, my fee shall be the ewes that are gravid with kid. Help me barn them tonight, and drive my ewes home tomorrow, and we shall have the rent of good Clummock's paddleraft to start you aright on your commission. As for tonight, take your ease, and enjoy the Buttercrock dames' incomparable culinary confections."

|

NIFFT II

At the Weskitt and Fobb I was sumptuously entertained. The Ecclesiarch's card, which I presented to the Chief Steward, elicited from that frosty functionary a deferent bow and swift service. I made use of the elegant baths in the basement, though a certain elusive something about them—was it a faintly subterranean quality to the air?—made me unwilling to linger there.

I soon presented myself to be shown to a seat in the dining chamber. The house did a lively business, and amid elegant diners, who filled the refectory with a genteel tumult of crockery and conversation, I made an exquisite repast.

As I sat viewing the gathering dusk outside the window, a tapster appeared at my elbow and presented me with a spice-sprigged potation of aquavit, indicating that it was sent me with the compliments of an angular, exotic dame of a certain age who, at my bow, beckoned me to her table with a smile of ironic charm.

"Amiable lady!" I saluted her, "Thank you for this cordial gesture! I am Nifft, an Ephesionite traveller." Her hand was very cold, and steely strong. She was lean and languid in a silvery sheathe of some reptile's skin, her eyes rimmed with kohl.

"I am Dame Eelritter, a Stregan, travelling too, though not from such a distance as yourself. You looked a bit at loose ends, Nifft. You struck me as a curious foreigner, hungry for discoveries, for local lore—an observant, enterprising fellow trying to get a feel for a new locale. Do I err?"

"You are clairvoyance itself!" I did not shrink from displaying an affability that bordered on fulsomeness. Any fool could see she was dangerous. Her spareness was as densely strong as a python's, and her being from Strega, one of the two Greater Sisters of the Astrygal Islands, gave her good odds of being a witch. "You have quite hit the mark! Of course as an outlander

one fears to seem rude, to poke and probe with queries, but one craves the doings, the details of a new land. Why else does one travel?"

"Why else indeed? Well well. There is so much I could tell you, for I know Hagia intimately. What about popular culture? What about ballads and other such artless rhymes. The anonymous popular verses of a folk—do such things interest you?"

I could not help displaying a brief hesitation. Unless this were a wild coincidence, a reference to what I'd just sold the Ecclesiarch seemed intended. Was her glittery, gleeful eye taunting me now? She could be grinning at her own thoughts, the apparent allusion pure accident, but I didn't really believe it for a moment.

"I relish such things! Ballads and roundelays and the like. Am I so transparent, Dame Eelritter, or are you indeed a reader of thoughts?"

"Neither, honest Nifft. It is, rather, that I am myself keen on folkloric verse. Let me share a particular favorite of mine with you. It is a local ditty, and a perfect gem of rural Hagia's unique ethnic whimsy. It is called `Something Unspeakable.' Listen:

Clawtip by clawtip, so gingerly-daintly!
Advancing now two steps, now one step, now three . . .
Hark there! Can'st hear it? Though ever so faintly?
Hear it tiptoe from thicket to gully to tree?
Something unspeakable followeth me!

What stayeth when I stay, and when I go, goeth?
It hasteth when I haste, and when I slow, sloweth.
To advance I'm afeard, yet to linger am loath,
Such tickle-foot terror attendeth on both.
Doth the boskage there stir? I search, but naught showeth!

Crickle and crackle old Crooked-Legs speedeth
And under my footfall concealeth his own.
Hast ever happ'd past some copse where Crook feedeth?
Heard his paralyzed prey—as he's drained—feebly moan?

Ye zephyrs that fluster the foliage, stand fast!
What was it, just yonder, that just whispered past?
What pursuer so leisurely-sly giveth chase?
Ye gods, let me not feel that thorny embrace!

Ye breezes harassing the high grass, desist!
By little and little, degree by degree
Thy rustle and bustle the monster assist—
Lest I be seized let me harken! Oh list!

That delicate stealthing—what else could it be?
From a footfall so multiple, what hope to flee?
For scuttling from thicket to gully to tree
Something unspeakable followeth me!

* * *

I did not need to feign fascination as she recited. Was this a threat? A warning? If the poem's theme had not seemed pointed in itself, her smile would have made it so, this cool, ophidian dame with her eyes kohled as fierce as a carnival demon-mask's. How could I not feel a taunting admonition against my thief's errand in the lines? Or was something else afoot. Had the hostile Fursten Minim, for instance, guessing my mission, sent her after me? The poem seemed to invite me to collude in derogation of

the god—to gull me into treason? To undo, or at least expel me? Cautiously, I probed for further disclosure.

"These are truly vivacious and sprightly lines. Forgive me for asking, but an outlander, if he needs anything, needs to know where he risks giving offense. Would not the verses be locally deemed as, well, disrespectful of the deity and his spawn?"

"In my great age, honest Nifft—" her kohl-rimmed eyes, though she smiled, looked cold and mirthless now, "—I find myself more and more indifferent to such questions. I indulge my impulses and follow my intuitions. For instance, I sense in yourself a love of other aspects of local culture besides verse—a love of architecture, for example. If I am right, then I suggest you go abroad a bit and view some of Hagia's justly famed monastia. Functionally they are rather awkward hybrids, combination cloisters-cum-banking firms, all of them prodigiously well stocked with specie—but most elegantly and variously architected, I assure you."

I nodded, my face displaying courteous interest, but my tongue quite unable to fashion a reply. If she were in Minim's employ, this was much too plain to be aimed at entrapping me—and I could not after all think she was a churchman's catspaw. This was a woman of power, and there was inscrutable challenge in her glinting eye.

She seemed to have been waiting for just this tacit impasse in my calculations, for now, leaning a bit nearer, she told me, "Neither the spidergod's wealth nor his welfare are any concern of mine, honest traveller. I have it in mind to offer you one helpful word, and I'm done with you. If you seek some opportunity to see the local countryside, then there is a place on the northern quayside, near the Maritime Museum, where those congregate who have some skills at arms to hire out. Get you down there in the morning, and see if there be not some employment that affords you the, ah, pretext for tourism you seek—and one with some remuneration withal. And so, I bid you good night."

I watched her sway lithely away amidst the tables. Would a witch who meant to work me woe make her insight into my business so blatant? Possibly. They can be as whimsical as they are wily, can the Sisters.

Against that I considered that no witch of any stature—none potent enough to fear—would be likely to deliver me to the spidergod's fangs. The Sisterhood has a long memory. To them the A'Rak is an upstart still. They are the aristocracy of Earth's historians, and are disdainful of all immigrants.

But what, then, did this Eelritter want of me? Did she really, for some unfathomable personal advantage, wish to promote my reconnaissance and, thence, my thief's errand itself?

The eleventh hour found me settling gratefully into an opulent bed, and resolving to determine my course of action according to my first impulse on waking. This is a trick of mine that has helped me on many a night to cease fretting, and fall comfortably asleep—which I promptly did.

* * *

At the same hour, the Ecclesiarch, Paanja Pandagon, was as far from repose as it is possible for a man to be. He was wrestling, as he walked through the empty streets, with even more urgent ambiguities than those that plagued me. Walking through alternate darkness and puddles of lamplight, his light athlete's tread scarcely echoing on the pavements, his each step taking him nearer the grand flights ascending the crags to the stadium crowning them, he murmured from memory the verses I had sold him. He couldn't really *present* them to the god at all, of course . . . could he? The fury, the threat in them! To take them even half seriously was . . . impious, wasn't it? To believe they could tell truly some risk to the A'Rak, ancient, colossal, and dire?

And most frightening of all, at bottom, was the thrill this gave him. The thought of an actual danger to Grandfather A'Rak sent a thrill of exultation along his spine. Such strangers to our own thoughts can we make ourselves when there seems no scope for them! But the cat was irretrievably out of

the bag now. At the mere hearing of these lines, the prelate's heart had mutined against the god, and thrilled to the thought that the giant might actually be imperilled.

He had felt the touch of the god's thought for the first time in his life this morning, and its awful intimacy left him wondering now: How far could the spider's mind see into his own? Would this rebellion in his blood not be *detected* by the god when he again touched his priest's mind with his own?

The grand stairs in front of him now majestically switchbacked five hundred feet high up the crag-wall. As he began to climb them he could see more and more of the stadium's balustraded upper rim, all drenched with moonlight. Each angle of the rim's oblate octagon wore sculptured pinnacles of bronze, and as he climbed he strove to still the thrum of terror in his heart by studying those bas reliefs while counting his steps, the game being to pinpoint at just what altitude various details of the sculpture became legible to the climber. It collected and concentrated him, and he was heartened by the poise he was able to command.

The city fell away behind him as the well known carvings came clear. At the three-hundred-fifty-ninth step, he could even see the exquisitely carven ships, their little masts and sails . . . Those were temples and domed halls chiselled in the panel adjoining. The City's wealth, the potency of their tower-crowned metropolis, were the sculptor's predictable themes for this most majestic and solemn monument to the spidergod's Covenant with Pandagon's countrymen. The stadium was the very altar of that Covenant, where the contract was resworn, where the city re-purchased the mantle of its lucrative vassalage by the annual tendering of a lot-chosen tithing of human lives . . . always few, in fairness. The blood fee was nigh nominal.

At the crest the stone flights became a smooth-flagged promenade that flowed forth to the mighty pylons of the stadium's City-Gate, and entered between the huge brazen leaves that stood always wide open. The arena's sand floor stretched beyond. Pandagon must now walk out onto that sand, walk straight across the long axis of its vast ellipse, and stand before the Gods Gate, which stood directly opposite the City Gate, but which opened

only one night a year, just long enough for the Chosen-by-lot to pass through, out to the god, and the doom that awaited them.

The prelate looked—partingly? he managed to smile to himself—down across lamp-spangled Big Quay, whose sea of roofs mobbed the knees of the cliffs he'd mounted. All the city's ridges and gables and domes seeming to vie like children urgent for notice and favor. Down along the quayside, watch-lanterns hung from jibs and rigging, freckling like fireflies the forested masts of all the ships undressed of sail and bedded down.

Would he indeed return alive to his beautiful, proud city? How could he walk into the A'Rak's presence, and keep hidden from the god's eye-jeweled hugeness, that thrill his spine had sung with at the thought of the god endangered? The god's inhuman thought, this morning, had seemed to go directly up his spine to his understanding. How could his own thought, his purposes, be closed to that millennial monster? Here he was even now thinking his treason unguardedly—and indeed *how* guard it, now he'd discovered it in himself?

The sacerdotal literature, the breviaries, early annals, constitutional chronicles—all his sources were silent on how deeply the god saw into his priests' minds. Hard and terrible it appeared to him, to walk across that arena's star-bleached sand. Yet he could not choose but do it.

So he passed through the City Gate, and stepped out onto the arena, his pace still deliberate, dignified.

Unheard of, this summons. Something utterly new. A private summons of the Church's Primate to the most terrible shrine of the faith, theater of the Covenant's most solemn rite. Pandagon's irrepressible intuition . . . or just desperate hope? . . . was that the uniqueness of this did mean unease in the god. The protocols were A'Rak's own. Revision meant . . . at least something unforeseen. To that frail hope of vulnerability in the alien giant, he clung as he crossed the moon-drenched sand.

The God's Gate, its brazen valves even vaster than the City Gate's, was graven with the City's (and Covenant's) history. A'Rak's Epiphany to the

Gleet-Shearers. The stages of the city's explosive growth filled the ascending panels, and the highest depicted the Quay thronged with trade and the Haagsford a-bristle with ships. As he neared the awesome valves, he had to crane his neck back to see them.

He halted, taking in the doors as a whole now, five stories high. For now, standing close, he sensed power bristling and swelling just outside them, sensed a presence outside them that was a match for their hugeness. Did not the great brazen panels even bulge with it, ever so faintly swelling and groaning with its pressure? Surely they did, just detectably! And he almost believed he detected too—like huge, remote millstones grinding slow—the murmur of that Presence's vital energy, a slow-cycling drone.

I am here.

The god's thought was a mere wisp, a fleet coruscation of comprehension. And it was a tidal surge at the same time, a huge impalpability, an immense will entering a single skull's little sanctum.

"I harken, oh revered A'Rak, and attend your will." What a chattery small noise seemed his speech in Pandagon's own ears! Such was the awe that aura-ed the Presence, that in it the priest found his terror almost suspended.

Look above thee Priest. Upwards! Behold!

Pandagon again craned his neck back, and saw nothing but the gates' brazen crest. Then, all along that crest, wispy movement caught the starlight. It seemed that some gauzy tapestry's broad hem—a silken skirt as wide as the gates themselves—had begun edging down, curtain-wise, over the graven bronze panels.

It came down with a whispery, scratchy sound, and little hitches and haltings gave its descent an almost teasing tempo, evoking a music hall curtain's coy flourishes for the comic turns. The incongruity of that notion augmented, if anything could, the priest's utter bewilderment.

A moment more and he could see dark figures embedded in the descending fabric, shapes knit in ranked array . . . ? Yes. The thing was a pattered tapestry then. Some woven proclamation? Writ large for the Convocation here of the Three Thousand two nights hence?

Steadily downward this tapestry scratchily whispered. The fabric was a dense silvery gauze—was thick raw silk. The ranked figures were the scratchy part. They were made of much stiffer stuff. And in fact they weren't woven shapes at all, but rather solid things webbed into the sheeted silk.

And then Pandagon grasped what he was seeing. His horror melted his knees and froze them solid again in the selfsame instant.

This descending curtain was a vast diaphanous shroud. The shapes in it, row on row, were spider husks—the mummied residues of the A'Rak's feedings. Here were every creature of any size native to Hagia's hills, riverfloors, and sea bottoms—a score of each kind formed the vast page's text. Their hides, tanned black by the venom, were sucked so tight to the bone that every tooth, joint and rib of them showed stark and sharp in the starlight, as clear as anatomic engravings.

Do you grasp what is blazoned here, Priest? That I have unscrolled for your eyes alone the tenderness for ye, my congregation, that I have cherished unspoken so long?

Pandagon then was to be sole human witness of this phantasmagoric whimsey—the whole thing had been wrought for his instruction. To bear alone the dire god's inquisition—such was his high office, his power and his danger! What did this ghastly riddle mean? But even as he despaired, he *did* grasp the grisly text's tale. The curtain was fully descended now, and he saw that it contained no human mummy.

"Revered A'Rak," he trumpeted, feeling his words ring now, his voice commensurate with his high office. "I behold here your studious care to disburden us, your partners in the Covenant, of the weight of your divine

appetite. How tenderly sparing you are of the sustenance we are plighted to yield you—this is what I see here manifested!"

His heart hammered, harder and harder as still the prickly whelm of spiderthought failed to flood him. Though the tension was torment, he had ceased to fear death here, tonight. At some point not many moments past, he had realized his present safety. This shroud had been wrought to awe and terrify him. He was needed for something.

It comforts me, Priest, to find you so wise in my worship. Here was the unearthly thought-flux tuned somehow to a solemn sadness! The silence before had denoted the deity's pain, then. *I have felt, Priest—alas, unmistakably—the foretremors of a dire Befalling, of a monster's advent to blameless Hagia's green and pleasant vales. I have kept my Covenant to stand Hagia's bulwark and battlement for her flourishing generations, and I shall keep covenant against this scourge to come, whose malevolence mocks your race's scope to grasp. The tragic consequence, priest, the ineluctable necessity, is that I must feed to battle strength, that I must nourish my might for the coming encounter.*

In the silence that followed, a breeze set the shroud to rippling, and the mummied beasts scritch-scratched against the bronze, their jutting bones softly gonging here and there. The tapestry seemed a naked death-writ now, one specimen page from the epic of Hagia's decimation. And was Pandagon here, the priest, to *preside* then over the hecatomb? Officiate the feast? He stared, numb and chill to the bone, at the eyeless grins, the crooked-shrunk paws and limbs in their dangling dance.

We grieve alike now, priest. We both stand mutely mourning—how not? But scant time remains, and now we must set to work. You must make altered provision for the Choosing. The grim gist of the matter is, five times the number we are wont to choose must be chosen on Shortest Night next.

When he'd taken it in, Pandagon swayed on his feet slightly, such was his relief. Perhaps a hundred, a hundred and twenty chosen! Grievous, to be sure, but compared to the abyss of slaughter he had just contemplated. . . .

The god now commenced an exact numeration of supplementary security measures. The ceremonial sequence of the Choosing was designed to contain and muffle any riotous impulse among the doomed. The Three Thousand convoked to the Choosing all drew their runes from the urn, and the priest then began bidding now the holders of this rune, and now the holders of that, to retire to the tiers and resume their lives. When the identity of the one or two death runes became clear, the damned stood alone on the sand, environed by the saved—all of them motivated to enforce the rite's result. In this situation, some dozen-score Bailiffs and Reeves sufficed to maintain order.

But now, clearly the traditional cohort of bailiffs must be augmented, for with five times the number of doomed, there would be five times the number of their kin or friends among the saved, and the situation could grow volatile. The god murmured numbers of actives, numbers of auxiliaries, the means of their mustering discreetly, the details of posting them handy while yet unobserved by the Three Thousand as they entered the arena.

These calibrations and reckonings trickled up Pandagon's spine, the god counting his congregation like coin: thus much slaughter, thus much panic, equalled thus many surplus of knout-and-net men for containment. And the priest, as he harkened to this unearthly murmur, became conscious of the degree to which the god had calibrated his own emotions, seeing that the mummy shroud was precisely intended to remind him of what the god *could* do, and make him embrace this epic homicide with the sense of relief that he had, in fact, felt. Pandagon had been informed of a hecatomb about to take place, and had been manipulated into accepting it gratefully, thankfully eager to serve.

The priest felt the kindling of anger, deep in his core. The anger gave birth to a perilous inspiration, and an heroic resolve.

"Great A'Rak," he said when his master had done, "My grateful knowledge of our debt to you emboldens me to dare your august displeasure and take

issue with your provisions. But I do not think they are sufficient to *ensure* orderly, decent, and devout delivery of your just tribute."

Thus launched, Paanja Pandagon found an effortless eloquence. Compelled, he said, by his loyal abhorrence of the impiety that panic might precipitate, he begged that the A'Rak's monastia be directed to provide the wherewithal to recruit a small precautionary cohort under the humble Ecclesiarch's personal command. It was only because the A'Rak's devoted priest had received in the Academy—as all of his class did—a first-rate military education, and that as a professional in the arts of force he was alarmed at the potential for mutiny here, that he dared the impertinence of correcting his deity's calculation.

What was the A'Rak a-weighing in the following silence—that long following silence—that led him, at last, led him to utter his gracious assent to the priest's proposition? Paanja Pandagon was to learn two days thence, to his woe.

|

LAGADEME III

A basket-work arch proclaimed the place in big wicker letters:

BOZZM OF BUTTERCROCK BYRE
CHEESERY & CHURNERY OF RENOWN

The farmstead thus announced, by its appearance, only half remembered the sign's prosperous optimism. The house and barn were of ample scale and proudly gabled; the milking and shearing pens' posts and railings were all marblewood notched and mitered. But all this was now badly weathered, the flowerplots were weedy, and the barn's sheddings of shingles added to the barnyard's litter of bent pails and broken carding paddles.

The widow Bozzm was milking a momile in that yard, absorbed in the work and oblivious of us. She was an opulent woman, hugely breasted and haunched, and the poise of her bigness on the tiny milking stool seemed a minor miracle. She was not grotesque. A charm auraed her lavishness, and she was as innocently, wholly female as the beast whose udder she eased. Indeed, the pair of them in their tranquil absorption, sitting long-shadowed in the dying day, made a charming tableau of feminine harmony and peaceful mutuality.

Then she saw us, and surged up, crying, "Dulcetty! Sleekey! She's here! Cousin Pompidor!"

From a low dome of timbers between house and barn—one of those thick-roofed, half-sunk structures in which the Hagish cellar their dairy and fruit for the coolth—a slant-laid door banged open and two red-cheeked young women as lavish as their mother burst out and charged towards us, arms flung wide, pouring out questions and greetings and laughter, seizing our

hands, petting our shoulders, begging the tale of our journey and swearing we were all welcomer than fly swatters at a honey-pie bake-off.

They seemed more easy hugging us than embracing Pompilla, with whom they seemed awkward, exclaiming simultaneously, "Sweet Auntie!" "Dear Granny!"—the titles mere affectionate honorifics, apparently. What we already knew of Dame Pompilla's volatility made their hesitance towards her easy to understand.

Widow Bozzm smilingly scolded them, "Girls! Leave dear Cousin Plumpbelow be to talk business with me, and take our dear Nuncio and her friends to the buttery for some refreshment!"

The two widows walked barn-ward in close conversation, and we were led down into the coolth of the cellar, a bath of appetizing aromas. Plainly they passed much time here. Central in the circular chamber were couches and settles and big lounging cushions, though the perimeter of the room was all business: larders, storage crocks, the churns and cheesing tables, racked cutlery, wash basins, egg-shelves and flour-sacks, even a pastry oven. The amiable girls insisted we sit—nay, sprawl with feet indolently propped.

Once we were settled, the sisters set up a great buxom bustle, their breasts jostling like pink shoats in their burdened bodices as they ground ginger for tea, ladled jam on current crumbkins, decanted bumpers of buttermilk—and, through it all, poured forth conversation as abundant as their provender.

Dulcetty: "Such a slyboots is Auntie in leeching that she'll soon set our poor little fleecies aright! How she can physic 'em, costive and purge, they've got teat-rash you know, our precious wee woolies, and trotter-gall grieves 'em sorely!"

Sleeky: "No Dulcy! Kooters! It's kooters they have, and Granny's a prime leech for Kooters—and the grunties too, which tortures the dear little bleaters as well!"

Dulcetty: "Kooters, yes, kooters too, a whole muck of ills they have but we don't want to weary you with 'em, dear nuncials."

"Not at all," I said. "Our client, Dame Pompilla, mentioned shank-rot as well. What makes your gleets so sick-prone do you think, my dears?"

"'Twas Daddum did all the pasturing," Sleeky mourned. "All the up-pasture down-pasture, the dipping and shearing . . ."

"Dadum," smiled Dulcetty sadly, "was right lean and tight o' shape like yourself, Dame Nuncio."

"Yes, `You female folk for the milking,' he'd say," (Sleeky too was tenderly sad here) " `and me for the stumping and shepherding up-dale and down!' That was our dear Dadum's saying."

Now *we* had done some up-hill-and-down-dale-ing, it occurred to them. *We'd* done some stepping about, they squealed, brightening. Had we been to Kolodria? Lulume? The Great Shallows? What did the Sea of Agon look like in those tempests one heard of? Had we ever viewed the Glacial Maelstroms?

We were fed and rapturously inquisitioned. Their sheer sociability was irresistible. Even laconic Shinn and Bantril, men as a rule only slightly more communicative than cobblestones, uttered entire half-sentences. But then the door thrust wide, and in burst our truncated, intrepid apparition of animated black gauze. "To work! Night draws near!" our Dame trumpeted.

The sun was now two spans from its setting, and the smallest barnyard debris cast long bands of shadow. Whatever the two widows had been about —I only noted a vague heap of small implements just inside the barn door —all was haste and clamor now to beat the dark. The sisters, with Shinn and Bantril loping by them like hounds—toiled upslope where the gleets were scattered (and a hungry, scruffy, skittish lot of gleets they looked). The four of them began herding and driving the beasts down towards the barn, though it was really my pullers doing the actual running and rounding up, while the sisters provided helpful shouts of encouragement and the Widow

Bozzm, too stout to attempt the climb, helped from down in the barnyard with even more vigorous arm signals, and encouragements and counsel bellowed at earsplitting volume.

Meanwhile our own widow—looking in her billowing flurry of veils like a small boil of smoke—thrust at Olombo and me mallets and spikes, and set us to work in the barn: "Board the windows and gaps in the barn wall, and the hayloft bays, and find wood to dog the main doors shut on me as you leave!" She was tacking up potshards and trashed scraps of pails and pans in nooks all over the barn's interior, and sprinkling in them a crumbly stuff which she lighted from a taper. Olombo and I planked and hammered in a fever we must have caught from hers, while vile, sweetish, slightly dizzying fumes coiled everywhere off the punk she'd lit.

We finished just after the sun set. The barn, once the main doors were shut, was tightly sealed. And here came the driven gleets, clattering and bleating into the barn. They looked even more hungry and draggle-fleeced near at hand than they had from afar.

Dame Pompilla came out with us, and with her back held shut the barn doors, behind which the stampede gradually quieted. "I will thank you, my friends, to observe my directives most precisely tonight. When I'm back inside, spike shut these doors securely. My unique blend of leeching employs odorific fumes, vigorous intonations, and other somewhat clamorous procedures. Disattend utterly! Whatever the uproar, I and my little charges are secure. Dine! Repose! Leave me quite undisturbed until sunrise, I beg you. And so, good night!"

As our hostesses led us back to their opulent cellar, Olombo and I merely agreed in undertones that amateur "barnyard leeches and rural physickers" were common enough since Squanderdabble's *Agriculturalist's Index of Salubrious Fumes and Tinctures* came into wide circulation, and that our widow's arrogant air of authority was typical of such dilettantes. Olombo confirmed my own odd impression: the widow's little heap of implements had included a number of quirts, riding crops, carriage whips and suchlike goads and stimuli, as well as my impression that there were scarce half a

dozen gravid ewes in the whole flock. It seemed improbable that six ewes with kid could raise the sum our employer sought for the raft, but she had seemed unconcerned, and we found it easy to feel likewise.

That this was the extent of our observations and reflections, we were soon to recall with vivid shame. Privately I concluded—with no greater perspicacity—that if our employer's present scheme, now too plainly that of an addled enthusiast, failed to yield Clummock's rent for a stern-paddle raft, I would make up the deficit from my own pocket so that we could be off on our commission, and have done with this odd, abrasive woman.

It did not escape me that if she *was* seriously addled, our mission itself might be a fool's errand, concocted of bereavement and mental imbalance, and one that could well be perceived by the spidergods as impertinence, if not outright blasphemy. But as I could never consider withdrawing from a sealed contract, what was the point of brooding on what could not be helped? So I banished further thought of it.

Had I not, the Bozzm women would quickly have done so—would have driven off any dark notion, such a sweet, savory commotion of hospitality they set going! Such a flutter of table linen, such a clatter of honeypots, bread trenchers, and cheeseknives, such a warble of chatter and laughter. So recently fed, we were soon sated with supper, and forced to decline further offerings.

Well, they countered, in that case, then, it was time for the sweet! For the pasty, the pudding, the pie!

It grew to a game, the rosy Bozzms, mother and daughters, vying to top one another's suggested delights, some of whose mere names watered one's mouth. Then Widow Bozzm gaped as if thunderstruck, the image of inspiration. She breathed her thought, hushed by reverence: "A Lathernog Silk Pie!"

The way this struck her daughters speechless deeply impressed us. The silk pie was forthwith decided on, and we vowed our help in a culinary accomplishment that proved to be of no small complexity.

Many elements exquisite in themselves flowed together in the confection of this Lathernog Silk Pie: egg-whirl marbled with momile butter, sugar-shells farced with nut-mince, momile cream and gleets cream lathered separately and then lathered together. "Help us with the churns!" cried the girls. Churns and mixers of several gauges were needed for the varying butters and lathers and froths. "Buntail! Shank! Help me churn gleets lather!" Sleeky sang.

"Plumbone, the butterchurn's heavy, come help!" trilled Dulcetty.

"Lackadome!" warbled the widow to me, "come help crank the whisker!"

Merry multiple dance-tempos—jigs, frisketts and jump-ups—emerged from the chugging and sloshing of churns and beaters, the partners gripping the staffs with alternating hands. "So much more *thrust* with you men a-plunging it," cooed Sleeky.

"How *silky* it gets with you helping slosh it!" Dulcetty tremoloed.

"What lovely lean thews you've got in your wrists and your forearms, dear Lady Lickadame!" Widow Bozzm vibratoed.

Through this lush, liquid commotion, I heard outside a far, muted clatter of hooves on old flooring, with a crisp punctuation of whip-cracks . . . and a strange, faint, fierce hilarity as well? Pompilla at work, of course, though I felt an odd shiver, as if that clamor in the barn were *touching* me in some subtle way. But I shook off the fancy at once. Pompilla's vigorous nonsense was a waste of my attention, far better directed at the luscious sight of the three fair Bozzms' bodices swelling and straining with the tidal heaves and surges of their breasts in counter-tempo to their churning.

The nog was complete, and crocked to cool and set. "The costards next!" was then the cry, said costards constituting the pie's silken foundation. Shortly the cellar seethed with new doings. In a great ceramic bowl on the charcoal warmer, honey and cream must be scantled, while prooms were simmered and sweeted with the lavender squeezings of the giant sugar-sloth beetle, dozens of whose deflated husks soon littered the floor. The sisters,

sharing their grips on their implements with my crew, sang jolly pastie-chanties:

This dainty sweet in mouth once put
Shall make thy tongue as stiffly jut
As spunk-bone doth on ram in rut!

—and other droll indecencies. How warm and flushed and rollicking we had all become!

Once more a faint burst of hooves and whips somehow reached me amid our jollity, and, along with that muffled noise of stampede, a sound of wild cachinnation. And that strange sense of being *touched* by the doings in the barn returned—touched in the nostrils, it seemed, with a scent of ancient straw, and humid gleets in estrus. Irritated at the interruption, I resumed our delights more ardently, shucking off my tunic, retaining only my light linen shift. The sisters squealed delight and shucked off their own billowy dresses and shirtwaists, so their thin shifts manifested the splendor of globed haunch and bosom.

Were we still confecting? I have a fragment of memory of costard being poured . . . to cool? To cook? But all thereafter was amorous embracing. Shinn and Bantril, bare as weasels, feasted on Dulcetty, each claiming his own hemisphere, while Dulcetty sang:

Oh Dear! Oh me!
Oh Shanky! Oh Banty!

Sleeky sat astraddle of Olombo, who lowed like a contented momile while Sleeky sang:

Upsy-wupsy, Oooohsie-eeasie!
Downsy-wownsy, Slowwww-sie-whoaaaa-sie!

Whilst above me hung doting dame Bozzm, luminously nude and lovely as the full moon, and we set to feasting on each other with such gusto as annihilated us utterly more than once, yet left us miraculously reconstituted each time after. . . .

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LAGADEME IV

Pompilla, self-released from her ramshackle prison, woke us before dawn. We left the Bozzm belles snoring softly and followed Pompilla out of the cellar. Thence she led us out to the road, driving before her a shadowy flock that looked at least two-score strong. We lagged some distance behind her for the first few miles, shamelessly indolent, rejoicing in how well we had turned this bizarre detour to good account in erotic benefit. And indeed, even when, not long after, we learned how brazenly we had been deceived and practiced on, we prized our amorous adventure all the more as priceless salvage saved from the shipwreck of our dignity.

Meanwhile, the growing light confirmed that our widow's harvest was substantial: at least twoscore ewes indeed, all dramatically swollen with kid. That they should—bulged as they were—trot so unflaggingly before her, not one of the beasts falling behind, was a minor marvel in itself. "She *can* leech!" Olombo muttered, and I had to grant it, though we couldn't understand how we had so drastically undercounted the number of pregnant ewes, especially ones as close to yeaning as these.

We recrossed the Ebonflux before the sun had topped the trees, and the Rattlespate before noontide. Her endurance at a jog-trot could no longer surprise us, and now it seemed we must grant a new respect to her competence in general. This is not to say that our re-entry of Big Quay along the North Highway, led by bulbous gleets a-bouncing and our dwarfish dame a-billowing, did not cause us the most acute embarrassment. She drove the beasts implacably through the civic core's thickest traffic, with neither hesitation nor collision, though frequently so near collision that our embarrassment often yielded to alarm.

Only now, our errand ending, did it sink home to me that she had trotted near twenty leagues to take ten leagues off our delivery's overland route. If this *was* a worthwhile trade, what must be the mission's peril? Most puzzling, why hadn't this struck me sooner? On our reaching Bozzm's dairy at least, when the detour's length was plain?

And what of our dalliance with the Bozzm belles? Though it was lovely in itself, it was so *unlike* me and my crew to plunge in without qualm or self query about the ethics of such a self indulgence, when we had only that day been commissioned and paid. Where had my thoughts been?

But here once more was CLUMMOCKS GARDED DOCKING AND BOTTUMS OURLY AND WEEKLY RAITS. Amusingly, Clummock had resumed his seat on the coffin, and by droll chance was so postured and positioned as to seem he hadn't stirred a hair since we left him there yesternoon—the coincidence so exact that Olombo and I burst out laughing.

Pompilla bade us rest outside the gate, and with a shooing gesture sent the strangely obedient flock swirling down the dock before her. As the beasts came to a milling, bleating halt near him, Clummock started exactly as if he *were* just waking from a twenty-four hour trance, and lumbered to his feet. His bigness bent to the Dame's littleness; he seemed impressed, intent. His brows raised, and he seemed to doubt his ears. Then he nodded and retired into his office, a raft-buoyed shed. We saw him emerge with large key, undoubtedly for the padlock that chained the sternpaddle raft to the dock. Just then a jingle of harness made us turn.

A fashionable little chariot pulled up, drawn by a skinny caparisoned in excessively musical silver bangles, like an overbedizened dowager burdened with bracelets. And though she was bare of bracelets, the lean, elegant dame who stepped out was luridly decorated, with silvered fierce-maned coif, eyes coronaed with kohl in sharp flametongues, and languid gestures that displayed rich rings. This stylish serpent's advent brought Pompilla's veils sharply round, then she turned back to Clummock and they spoke more urgently. The lean dame approached, smiling a tight snaky smile.

"Dear Nuncio! I am Madam Eelritter. Your, ah, Widow Pompilla is my pupil, in pursuit of an advanced degree at our Schollegium Academinary. I am afraid I must snatch her from you. She is to perform her Exordium before the Senior Somnolasts. Fortunately, I believe, she has your

commission quite poised for undertaking, and you are even now at the point of taking your leave, so I am confident that I do not intrude."

I glanced down the dock, where Pompilla and Clummock still communed closely. "As it happens, Madame Eelritter, we cannot embark until we have engaged a second spearman. One of ours was injured while we were crossing the Great Shallows."

"Well! How fortunate you spoke! Down-quay, at the southern stretch of balustrade fronting the Maritime Museum, the Hire Market is held at mid-morning. Mercenaries abound there, due to the war in the Shamnaean Bogs, where the Demonarch Gehenna-Gaad, claiming title to the island's north peninsula, wages war against the Shamnaean Sisterhood. You would do well to seek a spearman there."

"We are grateful, Madam," I said, which we were. "I must of course have our Commissioner's formal dismissal, and I suppose such charts or itinerary as she intends to provide. . . ."

Madame Eelritter had been darting ever fiercer glances at Pompilla's busy disattention. "Will you excuse me?" she asked—her voice scarcely concealing a sharp impatience. "I see I must prod my pupil . . ." Down the dock she strode, an impressive reptilian muscularity evident in her limbs.

I will not say that the two dames, when confronted, exploded in screechings, but such a muted storm of hissings and furious posturings ensued that huge Clummock staggered aback from it. Eelritter had the command, though, it seemed, and it was she who hissed the last hisses. The only words I distinguished were, "she whom you know," but the upshot was that here at last came our widow rippling petulantly back down the dock. She confronted me, and thrust out a scrolled parchment. "Your map gives your route in red ink. You are particularly enjoined to consult this chart anew at each branching or juncture, however sure you feel of your memory. Consult the map anew at every branching or turning of the way. Understood? Good. Lash yon casket on your 'shaw and lash the latter to the sternpaddler. Get ye upriver to hire your spearman, leaving the raft moored

and well guarded the meanwhile, and then cast off and head for mid current and set a paddling upriver at once. Carder's Weir is ten leagues, the fourth hamlet you'll encounter along the north bank.

"And, ah, one further caution: Stay clear of Clummock and his flock, and if he should chance for some reason to hail you and confront you, evade him and have no further doing with him. Your craft's hire is paid and *over*paid!"

The pair of testy dames lowered themselves into the chariot, Dame Eelritter made the little lash flicker, and the skinny flew spangling and jangling away, almost loud enough to conceal the furious hissing altercation the two of them at once resumed.

Now we were finally shut of the impossible widow, I suddenly felt she was too abruptly gone. Unscrolling her chart I found it exquisitely calligraphed and lavishly detailed, with cuneiform hill symbols and bristly forest symbols, and silver and blue veining in the larger rivers reporting deeps and shallows. The red ink thread that strung our route through this symbolic terrain terminated, at the map's opposite edge, at an octagonal ikon lettered small, but with passionate clarity: FANE ENDOZ THION.

I secured the chart in my belt. All was in hand except myself—my clear mind and collected will were absent. I felt I was but dazedly half-emerged from a long stupor, as if some stultifying influence had just been lifted from me, and I noted a vague air in my crew as well. Still we got our 'shaw from Clummock's office where we had sheltered it, got it on the raft and loaded the coffin onto the balance-board between its two tall wheels. It poised there quite perfectly, and was surprisingly light in the lifting, though sized for a man of heroic stature. When the laden 'shaw was secured to the raft, Olombo and Shinn worked the two-handled crank of the paddle, and backwheeled us out to open water.

Clummock had not been idle meanwhile—had got his yeaning ewes inside the rope-and-rail pen of a stock-raft and with a hired boy was himself getting ready to cast off. As we glided past him, he cried out to me, with an

hysteric note odd for his massive stolidity, "They're *watching* me! See em? Their eyes are telling me things without words!"

He seemed, nonsensically, to be pointing at his gleets. And then I saw it, just as we glided past: some of the gleets, grouped near their pen's rim, were indeed eyeing the bottoms man in a very pointed, fixed, ungleetlike way.

I and my crew grimly ground on upstream. Just below the Maritime Museum's pinnacled facade, we put in at a complex of small-craft docks, where ship's chandlers and other marine provisioners' shops were clustered. We moored. I left my pullers with the 'shaw, and Olombo and I started up the stone stairs to the Quay.

Even as we climbed, here came Clummock's raft. He docked a fair ways off from us, however, at a butcher-and-salter's establishment that made pickle and jerky for the larders of long-haul mariners. It seemed the bottoms man was wasting no time converting his new flock to coin.

|

NIFFT III

When I rose at midmorning, I found myself inclined to embrace the enigmatic Eelritter's urging to hire out my spear. In a country where the gods can smell thieves, it seemed prudent to merge myself with some larger body for whatever camouflage that might afford.

As I learned on enquiring at breakfast that the Hire Market would not yet be in full swing, I visited one of the 'Changes to see Hagia's renowned fiscal furor at first hand. Under the Change's vast-ribbed vault, a mob in well-tailored doublets seethed on the floor, and vied at screaming in unison and vigorously brandishing paddles of various colors, while, up in the great balcony above them, men with poles flicked incessantly at colored counters (corresponding to the paddles' colors) that were strung beadlike on the wires of a complex framework, the whole frame obviously a tallying apparatus.

The energy and ingenuity of it all soon grew tiresome, and I went to visit a public bath, wishing to test a notion I'd had about why I'd found the Fob and Weskitt's baths subtly unpleasant. There were robing and gaming rooms at the street level, but the actual baths were, again, below. I strolled about till I had found the furnace room, where the cisterns and pumps were also located. And here it was—that chill of unease filled the chamber, and I soon learned why. The water main feeding the cisterns came in from a sizeable natural vent in the living rock, and the attendant there explained that all the city's water pipes thus ingeniously took advantage of a natural system of caverns in the bedrock. I thanked him and left, musing on the Fane's altar pit, and on the A'Rak's and his spawns' hidden channels wormholing the great city's foundations.

From a quayside storage compound I reclaimed the arms I had stored on debarking yestermorning. I'd brought a quiver of five javelances, hangared to ride aslant the small of my back, and a brace of spears, tundra shortspears of my own modification. They were just my own height from shaft-butt to the tip of the leaf-shaped head, and I'd had the shafts lathed a shade thicker than tundra mode, though from the same Carnalin whipwood. I'd banded the

shafts with iron here and there for added weight and balance, and made the shafts with threaded joins midlength so I could carry them halved in slim, manageable sheathes. One of these I quivered with my javelances. The other I assembled, for I supposed it was time to advertise what I was carrying to market.

The Hire Market was held where a balustraded terrace fronting the Maritime Museum created a considerable widening of the Quay. Seekers of employment congregated about this terrace, and a wooden platform was wheeled out, from which warehousers, shipmasters, teamster bosses, and other such contractors could announce their needs and the wages they offered. The work-seekers, many deployed along the balustrade's curve, formed a lounging, sociable sort of assemblage some fifteen or twenty-score strong, and they were, as I soon discerned, loosely sectioned into professional camps. Weaponry was concentrated by the upstream end of balustrade's arc, and thither I made my way.

This zone was a bit out of voice range from the contractors calling their needs from the platform, but I soon noted recruiters moving among the men-at-arms themselves—here a pair of strategoi, there a centurion of the Lulumaen mercenaries, yonder a draughtmaster wearing the plume of an Ingens dragoon, tapping his wax tablet with his stylus as he chatted with some net-and-knout men. Such discretion was better suited to matters military, I judged, where opponents may learn soon enough as it is what one is mustering.

Employment abounded, and, easing into the crowd, I met none of the abrasive jockeying common where scarce work draws surplus seekers, and one must go careful of a fight. Here, I found smiles and a bit of gossip easily come by. The Shamnaean Bog Wars loomed large here, and seemed to have drawn hither the great majority of these hopeful pikes, bows, nets and axes, and swords of every forge and fashion. A crossbowman told me that Gehenna-Gaad's artillery was breaking vents and fissures in the subworld's vast, basaltic vaults, and that demon leakage was the main work for human soldiery. A siegeworks teamster with a huge plodwhip seconded this—a nasty mopping up war it was for human soldiers. The real armies,

the Witches' force as well as Gehenna-Gaad's, were such troops as few men dared encounter.

I leaned against the balustrade, and waited. After some time, I overheard the plod-skinner I had lately spoken with describing "titanoplods with squashers" to someone. I was idly picturing the house-sized brutes thus shod—an impressive sight to anyone who's seen it—when a murmur from the plod-skinner's questioner rang familiar. I discretely looked over, and there was Fursten Minim, Pandagon's colleague, talking to the 'skinner, and in a discreet voice which explained my not having noted him sooner. The oddity of a churchman doing this kind of shopping made his caution easy enough to understand, and I was careful not to let him see me. I was yet to learn, of course, what had just passed between the Ecclesiarch and the deity, which might have given me grounds for speculation.

I moved away, and resumed my watch. I was gazing idly down at the waterside, where there was a zone of small-craft dockage serving a cluster of marine outfitters—chandlers and picklers and bakers of ship's biscuit and the like—and I noted a tableau a bit out of the ordinary. There was a raft moored with a Nuncio's quickshaw anchored on it and a long dark something, looking more like a coffin than anything else, lashed on the 'shaw. There were two nuncials posted by the 'shaw, and these men seemed fascinated by another raft, laden with gleets, that was moored two docks away near a butchering-and-pickling establishment. Their attention directed my own to that concern's loading dock, where a large man gesticulated at the bloody-aproned butcher. After a bit, the butcher nodded grudgingly and retired within his shop. The big man looked uneasily at his restive flock, and just as he did so, something big and black exploded from the hindquarters of one of the gleets, and took to the sky with a mad flapping of batlike wings. The big man shuddered and turned his back on the flock, seeming less astonished by this rectal eruption than confirmed in a terror already tormenting him.

But here was someone right at my side, saying, ". . . spearman?" I turned, begging the speaker's pardon.

"I asked," said a lean, silver-maned woman with a Nuncio's little golden chevron dangling from her left earlobe, and accompanied by one of her men-at-arms, "if you are by chance a spearman? For hire, I mean?" She eyed me with an odd fixity, as if she knew something more about me than the two facts which my accoutrement and my location had made obvious enough. Perhaps it was just that she had such very direct grey eyes, sharp-judging eyes on all occasions, they looked to be.

My predominant reaction was gratitude to the enigmatic Eelritter for her suggestion that I come here. What a stroke of luck it had led to! Joining a nuncial mission would be perhaps the best safe-conduct a foreigner might secure for unobtrusively scouting out the country and its vaults of gold.

"I do beg your pardon," I told her. "I'm a newcomer here, and was absorbed in the sights. I am indeed a spear for hire and, if I may be forgiven for saying so, a consummate master of my art."

Still she looked at me with that absent-minded fixity—perhaps made skeptical by what was in fact an understatement of my skill with spear, lance, and javelin. "Please set me a test," I hastened to add. "You sir?" Here I addressed the muscled shaven-scalp beside her, who sported a lance with serrate head in the Taargish mode. "Set me some mark, I beg you." Even as he obligingly looked about, I spotted something myself. "There," I suggested, "that empty freightwagon, moving at a trot there—the rear wheel's hub?"

Such a hard mark bemused him, but I threw without hesitation. My stick thunked home inside the steel rim binding the axle's end, and I had planted it so nearly horizontal that the haft scarcely wobbled as the wheel spun on. I sprinted out and plucked it before the teamster knew of it, showing them I could run as well, a skill they would want in me as much as a good arm with a stick.

"A master spearman," cried shaven-scalp, "that's settled once and for good, sir—a master! I'm Olombo. This is our Nuncio, Dame Lagademe." I liked

this Olombo at once for his outright manner, and his unfeigned pleasure in expert spearwork.

"I am Nifft of Karkmahn-Ra." Olombo gave me a hearty hand-clasp. The Nuncio Lagademe gave me a cool nod for my bow.

"Are you versed in the local worship, Nifft?" She asked this with an air of cunning. Each word she spoke revealed her nature to me more plainly: one of those fiercely upright persons, unbending and brave and barren of humor, her moral judgements utterly transparent. "Our commission," she explained, "has for its terminus a distant fane of the A'Rak's cult, and we ourselves are ignorant of the local religion."

I was not reassured to learn that I must tread yet again in the spidergod's precincts, but I would deal with that when I came to it, while en route the chances for reconnaissance of the spidergod's gold should be excellent. "Alas, Nuncio Lagademe, I too am ignorant of the cult."

"Are you indeed?" Her stare, at this, struck me as being quite pointed. Who or what did this woman think I was? There was a pause in which she visibly suppressed something else she wanted to say. "The wage," she resumed, "would be a fine-gold sixweight, for a run some five days long. Under nuncial oath, your doings would be wholly at my disposition, and departures from the Nuncial protocol severely interdicted."

"Of course," I said firmly. I had known Nuncial protocol would have to be dealt with, though it seemed this Dame Lagademe was going to make rather a point of it. But I was resolved now. I must reconnoitre, if the grand, vague hope I nourished was to be brought to—dared one dream it?—a harvesting, and the universal (or nearly so) right-of-way granted Nuncios must be my shield in my preparatory investigations.

As I followed them down to their 'shaw, a great commotion and outcry drew our eyes toward the raft of gleets. Half the flock had escaped their railing, and with preternatural agility were leaping from the dock up onto the butcher's roof. Those still on the raft were prancing and bleating shrilly with a rhythmic emphasis that uncannily suggested bestial song, whilst the big

man and the butcher wrung their hands. As we watched, three of the beasts in succession discharged cannonades of flatulence, releasing two more batwinged blacknesses that flapped loudly skywards, and one multibrachiate blackness the size of a small dog which scuttled to the water and snaked away, propelled by the lashing of a whiplike tail.

"It would appear," I hazarded amiably, "that someone's been sold stock serviced by priaphs—the old yeaning-ewes trick, the two-gleets-for-the-price-of-one wheeze."

"Priaphs?" asked Lagademe stonily.

"A small, lustful species of demon—they don't harm the stock, and they do make them pregnant, though seldom with kid or calf. It's a well-known cheat among the Kairnish cattle folk. Hack sorcerers do it there, but here in the Astrygals I would guess it was the work of some witch wanting ready cash."

The Nuncio stood stock still for a long moment. Then she flew into a furor of haste and business. She reached the raft running and shouting orders. We were mid-river in moments, and cranking upstream with a will.

|

LAGADEME V

I had only to look at this Ephesionite hireling of ours, trotting at point with Olombo, to feel my jaw start clenching. The comedy of his unavoidable hiring seemed increasingly grotesque the longer I looked at him. So good a spearman! For this utility we were compelled to take him on, even as I clearly saw him for a palpable scoundrel.

He was perfect in the scoundrel's arts of affability. A droll, easy rogue, a phrase-turner, a man keener to hear your tale than hold forth with his own, but if he must, forsooth, enlighten or inform you, why, he was ready to give you the benefit of his experience, in a modest, self-deprecating way, of course.

He was liberal with information, for example, when Olombo—an ebullient man, bless him, and rather too quick to trust just such smooth, plausible, democratic villains as this Nifft—when Olombo told him of our amorous feasting with the beauties of Buttercrock Creek. To this tale Nifft replied, "Charming! Though the entire encounter, of course, would likely have been stimulated by the priaphs. Wherever anyone summons up priaphs to impregnate stock, these lustful demons will, through their aura, impart lascivious impulses to anyone on the periphery of their coital frenzies. Kairnish lore abounds with testimony to this phenomenon."

I'd been seething inwardly, of course, ever since Nifft's first mention—back at Big Quay—of priaphs, and the concomitant revelation that our crew had been a witch's dupes. I saw at once it was the plain truth. The instant it was out, the scales fell from my eyes. Our labile and densely veiled "widow"—in one stroke the utter improbability of her contrived identity stood revealed. The so-called Pompilla with her dizzying sachet! Why, its cloying fumes had almost certainly masked the smell of the obfuscatories she had undoubtedly been dispensing to dull our wits. There was no getting around the humiliation of it—to be witch-duped here in the Astrygals, witchcraft's very eyrie, where any sensible person would come on his guard against that very thing.

Of course I liked Nifft none the more for being the bearer of our disillusion, but I was sure that my assessment of him did not flow from his being the bearer of ill tidings. For there was simply no getting around the circumstances under which I first clapped eyes on him in the fane. That little tableau plainly proved him a spy, a lier-in-wait, and a secret sneaker-behind. To these, given his denial of any knowledge of the fane, I must add the character of a liar. He was all but certainly a miscreant, and he had that miscreant's allure, that raffish grace. I could not help thinking my Persander would consider this Nifft a perfectly fascinating fellow. In short, he was the very type of the life my son had chosen, the gaudy, unsolid world of Game, Easy Gain, and No Thought for Tomorrow. Our Ephesionite Spearman was a native of that Knave's Nation, that fellowship of triflers and wastrels, and it was hard not to feel, with a mother's loving illogic, that he was literally and personally subverting my son's career, stealing Persander's precious love from me month by month—stealing his loyalty to me and to the honorable uprightness I had tried to make him cherish. I all but shouted at the man, "Have done! Leave my son be! What good does his moral ruin do you?"

The highway crested the first of many ridgelines. Behind and below us the Haagsford River, and little Carder's Weir on its bank—just such a small dock town as Big Quay must have been before its hour of destiny—sank from sight. The highway led down across a river valley—the Mucklespring's Vale—so I called a rest while we were still in the meadow zone above the valley floor. We pulled the 'shaw onto the grass, stretched our limbs, and sat down to watered wine and biscuit. I weighed the words I wished to put to Nifft, and, through him, to my crew as well. Before I could speak, Nifft sharply asked, "Did you hear that?"

We all listened. There was only the easy breathing of the breeze through the grass and thickets around us.

"Do you know, Nifft," I began pleasantly, "in my first years as a Nuncio, I used to be tortured by the phrase `a fool's errand,' for I realized early on that at least half our commissions *were* fool's errands, by the common criteria of the world at large. Now in my maturity, I can quite calmly acknowledge

that half the world misuses the Nuncial guild. Nuncios are exploited for the universal respect and freedom of passage that all nations accord them—exploited by cynical clients who, in brief, *lie* to them.

"Our clients lie to us about every aspect of a mission that is capable of falsification: they lie about what it is we carry, about why we carry it, about the true identity of its recipient, about the risks attending the delivery . . . what do they *not* lie to us about?

"But you know, Nifft, it's just here that a Nuncio's famous honor lies. Nuncios unbreakably swear to fulfill their contracts on the unfailing assumption of perfect truth in their clients. This is exactly what many would call the Nuncio's famous *foolishness*. But it is this sublime assumption of truth in others that gives us the respect and unmolested passage we enjoy almost the world over. Our unflinching assumption of truth, and our unfailing fulfillment of contract that logically follows from this assumption, have *made* our honor, and made it known in every nation."

His eyes were fixed on mine. I waited for his comment. He said, quietly, "*Now* do you hear it?"

And then I *did* hear it, and the hair stirred on my nape. A soft, long-drawn moan, scarcely human in sound, issued from a copse of trees and shrub a rod or so downslope.

I gestured my pullers to stand to the 'shaw. I, Olombo, and Nifft fanned out in the grass and crept down toward the copse. Our probing ears found such silence within it, that we inched right to its periphery.

Now, from so close, the silence in the thicket changed quality. It was an *occupied* silence, that of a presence mutely intent on its work. Then there sounded a delicate crackle, as of a weight shifted upon the leafmold. Another gentle, long-drawn moan followed.

Now my nape stood stark: it was a human voice indeed, from a mouth frozen open, a lipless aperture emitting sound unshaped, its faintness testifying to frozen lungs that could draw scarce a cupful of air for

utterance. My spine was understanding this faster than my mind, and when I felt *another* kind of emanation from the coppice, I groped for its meaning with terrified incomprehension.

This other emanation was an indescribable, prickly flux, a vaporous friction, a ghostly turmoil in the air that hovered over the groaning man. It felt more like a touch than a sound, yet I found myself struggling to *hear* it somehow. It whelmed out like invisible smoke from a fire, yet it seemed to probe softly for my understanding.

And with this intuition, comprehension came. It was a hellish, inhuman speech, pure thought imparted to the nerves and brain, an intimate, cozy murmuring of the Devourer to his helpless, still-conscious food:

. . . strange for you? To bid your limbs move, and find them unmoving? We relish you most for this amusing perplexity—our mindless prey are dull by comparison. . . . Now I shall begin to feed, here upon your legs . . . thus, and thus . . . I introduce the solvent that dissolves your tissues for my sucking out . . . mmmm, exquisite, that first sip of the fleshy soup!. . . . Slow and savoring is our creed, no gobbling, eh?. . . . You'll be with me quite a while yet before I must dissolve your vital parts . . .

My eyes had found my horror mirrored in Olombo's, and Nifft plainly understood as well. I have never mustered greater self-command than in signalling to them our silent withdrawal, and in setting the example of swift and noiseless retreat. Our looks and my gestures sufficed for Shinn and Bantril. In moments our 'shaw's wheels were whirring again down the highway.

We triple-timed it down the highway in good order. Through the forest, across the river bridge we trotted, our footfalls perfectly synchronous, our demeanor dignified and grave. But the truth of it was we were running pell mell, fleeing in terror. We'd encountered our first god. We'd thought ourselves braced for it, but how utterly unprepared we were in the event. Unprepared for the shame, for one thing. The abasement of having to leave a still-living man in the jaws of that alien abomination! It was humiliating

to have to confirm—by our abandonment of that poor person—the monster's *entitlement* to human food. The Covenant was everyone's nightmare.

When we had gained the next ridgeline, the sun hung scarce an hour above the western hills. I felt a craven relief to be up in the wind-licked grasses of the heights, a world above the spidery thickets and bosks of the dark valley floor. A new valley lay below us, but our route now followed the ridgetop for a while, and we meant to pass the night in a highland village just ahead. Hagia is a lush and lovely land. The tawny highland grasses rippled with the winds like licked fur. The valley below us was a great green bowl half full of shadow, and in the unshadowed half the neatly appointed farmsteads, and some grand stonework structures as well, wore the lovely gold light of late day.

As I mused on the prospect, I heard Nifft's cheery voice: "I say, Olombo—yonder stone-walled cluster of little domes and spires—just past the shadow-line there? Could that, Olombo, be one of this land's renowned monastia? I have heard they are marvellous specimens of the native architecture."

Olombo, guileless as he always was with another hail-fellow sort whose prowess he respected, affirmed that the little structure so far below did indeed resemble such descriptions as he had heard regarding those fabled coin vaults.

Meanwhile I was thinking that, coming from Nifft, an interest in monastial architecture had a disingenuous sound. Extravagant though the notion was, I actually wondered if the man were not merely a chiseller and swindler, a cozzener and sharper. Could it be that the man was an out and out *thief*? That he had come—*here* of all places—to *steal*?

I was glad to let this wild thought go—our association was unpleasant enough without indulging in hyperbole. Still, I meant to have his skulking business in the A'Rak Fane accounted for. For if our mission was some

witch's trumpery, as now appeared, we stood in that much more danger of the god's being offended by it, and that much more in need of information.

"I am in some puzzlement, Nifft," I declared, advancing to point and falling in step just behind him and Olombo. "I recall you most emphatically telling me you were wholly ignorant of the A'Rak's worship. But what I can't get out of my mind is the oddest coincidence. For you see, yesterday morning I chanced to see you—before I knew you in the least, of course—chanced to see you . . . how shall I phrase it? Well, it was in the Big Quay Fane after morning service, and you appeared to be . . . quietly *shadowing* the Ecclesiarch of the Church back towards his private quarters! I don't wish to pry, but can you in fact be *wholly* ignorant of the A'Rak's rites?"

"But indeed, Nuncio Lagademe," the lanky rogue protested, "I *am* ignorant of the spider god's worship. I know that tomorrow at the Choosing, some score or so of lot-chosen victims will be devoured by Grandfather A'Rak, and that this is done every summer solstice. There you have the whole of my knowledge on the matter."

I waited for more, but evidently he would still have left me uninformed. I goaded him, betraying some exasperation. "Will you *tell* me the subject of your visit to the fane yestermorning? I do not idly pry. If our, ah, mortuary mission is after all bogus, some cover for our witch's hidden aim, then we could be in danger from a deity we unknowingly offend. . . . Slow March, my friends!"

We had just rounded a curve, and here ahead was the pastoral hamlet of Haggis. The hub of the place, right beside the highway, was a little sprawl of pens, corrals and milking stalls, all under a canopy of plank roofing supported by posts. This communal gleetery was swarming now as herders brought their flocks in from pasturing for the evening milking. The whole village seemed present. Those not actually inside the pens milled and gossiped in a great gregarious crowd that overflowed onto the highway. We courteously detoured round the throng while I pressed Nifft again, causing him to heave a protracted sigh.

"Nuncio," he said with an infuriating tone of harassed good breeding, "I am enjoined by the Ecclesiarch to absolute discretion. You must rest content with little, though it is still more than I have any right to disclose. In brief, while in the Great Shallows, I chanced upon a rumor of some danger to the A'Rak. I came hither to sell this bit of hearsay, and was indeed generously remunerated by the Ecclesiarch, in return for which I was sworn to strictest confidentiality."

". . . Some . . . *danger* to the A'Rak? . . . excuse us please, good folk."

"Just so. . . . Please forgive us, sirs and madams! We are a funeral procession. Please forgive us if we incommode you."

We were all abruptly disconcerted to find ourselves encountering a marked unwillingness among the foregathered folk of Haggis to yield us the slightest room for passage. The villagers were in the main a lean and sunburned folk, pale-eyed and steady-gazing. They had seemed, at a distance, quite vivacious and gregarious with one another. The faces they now turned on us at our approach, however, were as cold and set as stone. This calculated two-facedness was most unnerving, the more so since their stoniness barely contained a hostility which glinted fiercely in their eyes when closely confronting us. Could they—I fatuously marvelled in my distraction—have some traditional dislike of the Nuncial Guild? Once again it was Nifft, that morally ambiguous man of the world—who supplied the needed information.

"I have heard that Hagia's highlanders," he leaned near me to murmur, "furiously dissented at the very outset from the Covenant with the A'Rak. Nowadays they send their wool and cheese to market with the rest of the country, but regard the lowlanders and their Covenant as despised foreigners."

It was our coffin, all spidered over with A'Rak runes, of course! I could scarcely fault Haggis for an outraged loathing of the Covenant. Indeed, galvanized with loathing myself by the feeding we had lately overheard, I could understand just how intense their dislike of our commission must be,

and I began to fear a little for our safety hereabouts. I'd thought to shelter here, but now determined to put the village behind us and camp on the highway tonight.

In our crossing of that town we encountered what must have been its entire population, and not a single word, civil or otherwise, was directed at us from beginning to end. For all my sympathy, the cumulative sense of insult quite stung me.

"What oafs! What troglodytes!" I cried when we'd put Haggis behind us. "What a sullen, vindictive, moronic breed of rusticated rurals and backwater dolts! Have they never heard of nuncial impartiality? Of our sacred neutrality?!"

"Dolts?" came a voice from behind us. "Might you hap to be characterizing in such ungentle terms my towns- and kin-folk of happy, healthful Haggis?"

It was a woman who asked us this. We wheeled and stood, a ludicrous tableau of the thunderstruck, staring at her there on the highway, onto which she'd just emerged from the high grass. Smallish, and spare withal she was, but with eyes an unsettlingly pure, limpid blue. From the belt of her short kilt hung a hangared blade heavily curved and with the murderous massiveness of a cleaver about it. She carried as well a javelin athwart her back, and a sling with a pouch of lead shot big as walnuts.

I was still stung, and answered quick. "Madam, I ask your pardon of course, but since we are no more the A'Rak's servants than yourselves, it makes your incivility the more vexing. We are commissioned to entomb yon casket in an A'Rak fane, and as nuncials our neutrality is accepted the world over. More than this, we have ourselves been misused. We now know our client to have been a witch in disguise! We are hoaxed! Perhaps you could be moved to aid rather than abuse us. Is it some heresy we're sent upon, for which the godspawn themselves will seek our lives? We in fact know next to nothing of the matter!"

I was ranting like a fool, but finding at least some relief in it. She stared at me, coldly weighing my words, or perhaps taking my personal measure. "If

a witch has hired you," she observed, "she'll not likely destroy you before she's had what she paid to get from you—for witches are very tight-fisted as a rule."

"But how can we know what it *is* she has paid to get from us? Her true aims are masked. Our Nuncial honor compels us to execute the letter of her commission, though we now know it to be a charade. Our deaths under the fangs of the outraged deities, useful for some larger plan of hers, could be the very thing she's hired us for!"

I knew my own words for folly as I spoke them. I was railing at my own self-chosen fate, at the inherent danger of my nuncial honor.

The sun was down. It seemed, in the following silence, with the breeze washing over the tawny, rippling ridges, that we could actually feel old titan Earth's wheeling on his oiled axis, and Night's sliding approach with her silent storm of swarming stars.

The highlander tipped a nod at our coffin. "Your spiderspawn might little care whose ends you're serving, because it's hungry times everywhere so nigh the Choosing. My stead's well walled. You may camp the night in my paddock, and I'll sup you as well, for two gold lictors."

"They are not *our* spiderspawn," I could not forbear snapping. Her price was twice a fair rate. We might learn from her though, if she would talk. "We thank you for your offer, and accept it," I told her frigidly. I told her our names.

"I'm Mav," she said, turning on her heel. "Follow me," she threw over her shoulder, and led us brusquely down into the slopes of windblown grass, under the fading afterglow of the vanished sun.

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NIFFT IV

Mav's walled paddock was a tidy grounds where barns, sheds, shearing and milking stalls and the like were neatly arrayed, but it was, like all such pastoral compounds, not unredolent of gleets' dung. I willingly forgave this homely aroma, thinking it a slight price to pay for the fine wall surrounding the property. Sturdy mortared fieldstone this wall was, half again a man's height, and crowned with cruel spikes for the underbellies of spiders. That feeding a'rakspawn's gloating intimacies with his pinned prey still gave me after-shudders as we sopped bread in bowls of gleetsmilk, round a rather parsimonious little fire Mav had built us in a brazier.

I won't dwell here on the doubts about my character which appear to have sprung so spontaneously to life in my new employer, though it goes without saying (. . .)

My silence on these matters is the more fitting in that she had not yet at this point fully articulated to me these grave misconceptions of hers, though by means of innuendo, and nuances of tone and gesture (. . .)

In sum, I bore her unspoken slanders with stoic courtesy, having scant attention to spare her crotchets. I am sure, my dear Shag, you have already astutely inferred from my report thus far that if the rumor I'd come here to sell proved out as a veritable prophecy, I would be far indeed from grief-struck by it. It would seem to me, if anything, an opportunity to be improved upon with all dispatch, and I craved to explore ways and means to this end with knowing locals. But with pious, or even merely conventional citizens, I dared not rouse a hue and cry against myself by speculation on the deity's downfall.

But this Mav now, in her highlanders' enclave with its dissident, even separatist tradition—what seditious lore might her people not have preserved through the generations? What might she make of the verses I had sold Paanja Pandagon?

She was exceeding short-spoken, yet would not quit our company, summoning her two daughters to our little supper-circle (two grave, pale-eyed little versions of herself, slender and tough, their gaits as smooth and as neat-foot as cats) and sending them off with instructions for securing the farmstead against the night. Seeing the profit she'd got from us—two gold lictors for a scant mess of coarse bread and skim milk!—I knew she was as tight-fisted as any witch. Did she linger among us to be sure we stole no croziers or carding-paddles from her sheds? Or did she suspicion us for the spidergod's faithful after all? Even after our Nuncio's humiliating proclamation of "our" deception? (How that mortified me! *I* hadn't been duped! I had *undeceived* her and her crew!)

"What is that weapon of yours, Dame Mav?" Olombo asked her. I'd wondered the same—a short but strongly curved blade with the breadth and mass of a cleaver.

"You've not seen a sunder before? It hacks and it throws equal well—rightly thrown, with a nice whistly tumble to it, it'll clip off four spiderlegs right in a row, snickety-snackety. This was my late Mackle's sunder."

"You take arms against the, ah, gods?" I tried to make my delight sound like anxious awe. "You . . . kill them?"

"The littler ones now and again we do manage to accommodate in that way, yes. My Mackle killed one with his here. Out in the hills one dusk with his flock he was, when he had one spring out from a thicket at him. A spawnlet scarce five times his size it was, luckily. He pitched this blade in a whistly tumble, and cleaved the spawn's foresection like a rotten rumkin."

"Then the, ah, god killed your husband with a dying stroke?"

"Ha! The divine runt-bug was dead as dung. Mackle died elsewhere long after, died of getting drunk midst his flock one night in the High Tors, and lying stupored too long past sun-up, when some 'gnaths flapped down and started gnawing on him. A soberer man would have roused up and drave them straight off, but drunk as my Mackle was, the 'gnaths ate him down to

clean bone without waking him. He was a great thundering lout, but I miss him now and again. . . ."

The following silence was not one of mourning for Mackle, I fear. Whatever our unuttered conflicts of aim or of interest, mine and my nuncial friends, we knew perfect harmony just at that moment, imagining the butchery of an a'rakspawn, and the joy of it.

And Mav knew it, this little Mav such a slyboots it seemed, behind all her upcountry bumpkin-slang. She seized the moment of our beguilement and gently pushed for what, when I heard it, I realized she had wanted to know from the start.

"Would you tell me, Dame Nuncio, the place you are taking yon casket? It may hap I could help you some way in the finding it."

Here came the most high and holy nuncial protocol thought I, when Lagademe responded with silence at first: a lofty refusal to violate confidentiality, even that of a lying witch. But then, by the Crack, she drew out her map!

"I was not told this was private, after all. I'd be obliged to know if you find it accurate, in fact. The red line marks our route—you'll note we're to swing east down across the Murkside River Vale some ten leagues north of here."

Mav's busy eyes ate up the vellum. "You're mistaken, Dame Nuncio. You're to swing east 'crosst the next valley north, the Ribbonrill River Vale—this turn's two leagues distant at most."

"Oh no, you're mistaken my dear!" But when Lagademe had it back, the map dumbfounded her. "I'm not wrong," she growled. "It's *changed*. This bloody-foul map is witched too! Of course! That's why she said check it each time! She's changing it as we go!"

Mav was nodding thoughtfully. "If so, Dame, it's changed for the better now. You know what tomorrow night is, do you not? By the route that's been changed, you'd have been crossing the Murkside bottom woods at just

about darkfall on the night of the Choosing, and while you don't want to be abroad at all on that night, you especially don't want to be down in a bottom-woods. But by this changed route you'll climb out of the Ribbonrill with daylight to spare. . . . Do I read that aright, Dame? That the fane you're taking your coffin to is called . . . Endon Thioz?"

"Yes, Endon Thioz. Do you know of this fane?"

Mav smiled vaguely. "I'm going to ask my friends of it tomorrow. My girls will bring you breakfast at dawn and see you back to the highway. If I . . . learn something of value, I'll overtake you, and you may have it for a price."

"Overtake us. . . ." Lagademe didn't like that, but let it pass. "At what price, exactly?"

"I'll know that when I'm sure what I'm telling you. You can pay it or not—I'll not charge you for my coming to find you, if you don't want my news."

Although Mav left us then, and we all not long after lay snoring, the events of that night are not yet told. Far from it.

For that same evening, Big Quay's religious calendar was marked for the penultimate ritual step toward The Choosing on the following night, the summer solstice. That evening the rune-engraved chits whose drawing was to separate the Chosen from the Saved were prepared with solemn ceremony, and conveyed to the Ecclesiarch for his use on the morrow.

Again, what I here supply I learned only after the fact—and barely survived to learn at all.

The rite I speak of was the Rune Reading, conducted each year in the "coin-cellar," or vault, of a different monastium. It was an awesome ritual, for in its course the spidergod, through one of his sons, spoke his will directly to his human servitors.

By calendrical rotation, the honor of hosting this year's Rune Reading had devolved upon the Klarvcoffert Monastium, a particularly prestigious coin-coven situated not far in-country from Big Quay itself. Arch-monast Geldergrab, primate of the Klarvcoffert monastium, had received six months ago the twenty urns of runes at a brief midwinter ceremony. In this ceremony, the monasts of the Scintillion Monastium, last year's rune-keepers, had carried the bronze amphorae of runes in procession down to the Klarvcoffert coin-cellar, where they had stood untouched till tonight.

At about the time, by my reckoning, that the fair Mav was telling us of her late husband's adventures, the Klarvcoffert campanile tolled First Evening Bell, and the Rune Reading commenced. The rite had an element of manual labor about it, as well as involving some unsettling communion with one of the Deity's sons, and so the arch-monast Geldergrab followed the custom of all monastial primates, and deputed an underling to officiate. His choice was Prelate Pankard, his trusted chief of Transferrable Draughts of Deed and Title.

With two scribes from Reckoning to assist him, and with palms moist with fear, the slight, bookish Prelate Pankard began his descent of the stairs leading down to Klarvcoffert's deepest vault. The scribes preceded him with lamps, while Pankard carried only a small silver casket.

Solemnly they descended several gloomy flights, the last flight hewn from the living bedrock. When the scribes opened the coin-cellar's outer door, the brazen valve's great mass groaned on its hinges. When they had stepped inside, Pankard bade the door be shut behind them, a requirement of the protocol he would gladly have foregone from his dread of being close-chambered with one of the a'rakspawn, notwithstanding that the hideous being was supposed to be concealed from his direct view.

Within the main door, the cellar wall was doored with the heavy hatches of subsidiary vaults—a deed vault, a draught vault, a gemstone vault, a bullion vault, and the like. The bedrock wall had one unsealed aperture, however, and this was the crooked narrow mouth of a natural fissure in the stone, this

vent of a bigness through which two men might, with some jostling, go abreast.

Five of the urns had been tipped over, disgorging spills of graven copper lozenges, worn smooth—for all the brevity of their yearly use—by fearful, fretting fingers.

Only five urns spilled? The three shared doubtful looks. Had the a'rakspawn finished before withdrawing? Customarily each drawing's three thousand tokens were compiled from varied proportions of around a dozen runes. Then spiderthought rippled from the vent's crooked mouth:

Advance, and gather thy runes by my reading.

The formula, prescribed by church writ as the commencement of the process, ended all doubts. The scribes took up the empty urn they would bear away filled.

Of Lapta Rune, four hundred.

The scribes plucked up the copper rhombs, and by turns dropped them in the urn to the count which Pankard slowly intoned. (How interminably long must such a proceeding, in such a crypt, begin to seem?) The count done at last, and all spillage restored, they righted the urn of Lapta Runes.

Of the Uruk Rune, six hundred.

And so it proceeded. At length, the endless slow-march of numbers, and the matching clatter of copper counters, came to an end. The scribes closed their collecting urn's mouth with a round wooden wafer rimmed with a waxen gasket, which they melted snug to the jar-mouth with their un-chimneyed lamps. Pankard gripped his casket, nerving up for the last brief task, when spiderthought again touched his, sinking a fang of fear through him. The rite prescribed no further utterance from the god.

Let thy helpers retire with their runes, priest, while thou remainest.

Pankard was instantly running sweat everywhere under his cassock. Why he alone? That wasn't the protocol! Disobey, of course, he dared not. When the great valve closed behind him, he began to tremble.

Advance, Priest. Time does not abound for our many needs this night.

From the outset he had known he must approach the fissure to put the Priest's Cull in his casket, and the prospect had terrified him. But this unprecedented solitude, this rupture of protocol . . . he shivered so, nearing that black crack, that he was sure he would fall. He attained the fissure, somehow, and knelt there. An alien air, the otherworldly breath of A'Rak-kind, whispered from the darkness that the stone lips portalled. On the floor just within those lips lay the five-rune Cull, one rune of each group for him to put in his casket by means of the little horn scoop it contained—for the death rune or runes were marked as such, invisibly, by a fang-touch of A'Rak's venom. At the drawing the Arch-Priest would not know the death runes till he touched them, and they burned his hand.

But on this night there was more than the Cull runes lying inside the fissure. Behind them was a stout satchel of plod-hide.

Pankard's shaking hand made the Cull-runes rattle in the scoop, but he got them into the casket.

Now priest, take up the satchel, and fill it with gold coins of middling denomination, to a valuation of ten fine gold hundredweight in sum. These, with the Cull, convey thou straightly this same night to Big Quay A'Rak-Fane and tender both to the Ecclesiarch.

Pankard sensed the godspawn withdraw, and trembled now with relief as he opened the coin-vault. He could only just manage the filled satchel's weight.

The Prelate brought his strange news to Geldergrab. Arch-monast Geldergrab had not reached his cloistral preeminence by debating for even an instant an A'Rak's pecuniary dispositions. A vehicle was commanded, and Pankard dispatched with his satchel to the metropolis

Pankard's carriage-wheels whirred him down eight leagues of starlit highway within an hour. A sexton met him on the Big Quay Fane's steps, smoothly relieved him (much to his anxiety) of satchel and casket, and conducted him, surprisingly, not to the synodium in the sacerdotal annex, where church fiscal affairs were discussed, but into the Fane itself, and down through the silken-veiled, high-vaulted emptiness, toward the dais surrounding the altar-pit. Upon the platform, cressets burned round a makeshift array of benches occupied by perhaps seventy or eighty men whom the Ecclesiarch, standing, had been addressing. They all paused to watch Pankard's approach, and the monast noted as he neared the assembly that most of them wore the octagonal caps of Bailiffs of the Fane.

"Welcome, Prelate Pankard. Thank you for your haste." Pandagon and Pankard had in fact known one another at school as youths, but it required the Ecclesiarch's pleasant smile to encourage the timid monast to point out, as he climbed the platform, "The, ah, your, ah, sexton has the ten—" He broke off in sudden terror of an indiscretion. Pandagon, however, wished the sum to be known.

"The ten hundredweight in gold, yes, thank you Prelate, it is part of the precautions we've gathered to implement tonight—precautions against a very real menace to the secure performance of the Choosing." Pandagon was glad to see his audience's impressed gazes converge on the satchel at his feet. He wanted them impressed. Normally the Hundred and Twenty—the Bailiffs and their Reeves who constituted the armed wardens of public order at the Choosings—were convoked in the sacerdotal annex. Pandagon had gathered them here because, as he personally knew, to abide near the brink of the pit was to feel awe.

But they must *be* here to be awed, and fully two score of the Reeves had not yet arrived, though all twenty-four Bailiffs were present. The Ecclesiarch was not surprised. Bailiffs were on the Fane's pay year-round, groundskeeping and maintaining not only the stadium, but the many valuable secular properties of which the Fane was owner of record, including two theatres, three public baths, and several thriving hostelries. The Bailiffs lived their posts, and were municipal functionaries in spirit, of

that familiar type who are keepers of the civic score, who like to see punishments paid and dues rendered.

But the Reeves—each Bailiff was the nominal commander of four Reeves of the Fane—were salaried only for their work at the Choosing, and lived by any number of means through the year. They had in common with the Bailiffs a life-long exemption from being themselves called to "stand the draw" on Shortest Night, but were inclined to be less at ease with the exemption. Pandagon believed they felt some shame in that one night's work, when they must drag the weak-kneed, wailing Chosen through the God's Gate into the crags where he awaited them. In the days before a Choosing, the Reeves were likely to be out a-drinking, and it was to the missing Reeves' likeliest watering holes that Pandagon had already dispatched constables to retrieve them.

But should he wait till they were brought in? He sensed he must not let the drama of the moment dissipate. He was now playing a tricky game, performing for two audiences, the invisible one the most perilously crucial to convince, but these front line men at arms also critical, for they must be braced to stand firm without knowing against what. Instinct told him to take the gold's cue. Galvanize these, and they would pull the stragglers into line. He shifted aside the short field cape he wore, displaying the pommel of his shortsword, a good working sword from his Academy days, but newly pommel-stoned with the god's carven onyx octagon.

"Gentlemen!" He let it ring, startling many, whom the pit's nearness held on edge. "Comrades in arms! I rejoice to see you men of mettle! On this Choosing, we face a grave threat from the forces of disorder! We must be steeled to stand fast to our duty to Grandsire A'Rak, Father of Mines, Finder of Gold, by whom our nation prospers, and to whom we ourselves are the sworn retainers. Ten hundredweight of gold! It will fee a cohort of reserves, directly under my command, reinforcements for yourselves, to secure you against this menace, whose identity I dare not now divulge, lest I augment its strength against you. I urge you only to loyalty and readiness in our great deity's service! Lo there, where our stragglers come! Forward, tardy gentlemen!"

Luck had blessed his instincts—here, perfectly timed, came a squadron of Constables ushering ahead of them the majority of the laggard Reeves. "Latecomers," he trumpeted, "come up and advance to the altar's brink! Announce your presence to the god, and assure him your lateness betokens no laxity, no delinquency from his service in this hour of emergency!"

Baffled and anxious the derelicts cringed to the pit's brink, their wine-reddened eyes and dishevelled hair adding to their look of shame and penitence. Their mumbles and mutters echoed down into the pit: "Stimp present, great spidergod, your servant!" "Bawdwick here Sire! I serve!" "Forgive me, Sire, Sodkin, loyally yours!"

Their discomfiture made the rest grateful to have forestalled such shame, and unified their puzzled resolve. Nothing could have increased their readiness for something completely unspecified—except what instantly followed those Reeves' apologies—spiderthought outwelling from the pit:

I greet you, faithful soldiers all. I rejoice in your steadfastness. Know too that for your service, as for all services, the A'Rak's gratitude is golden.

Here was the primal bargain of the Covenant all over again: the raw gust of alien terror perfumed away with the equally raw scent of naked gold. Paanja Pandagon exulted. His invisible audience had indeed been at hand, and had been persuaded by his performance.

LAGADEME VI

We were afoot at dawn, but our hostess was away before us. One of her daughters—dear, solemn and capable little things they were!—repeated her annoying reassurance of the night before. "If you please Dame Nuncio, our Ma says she'll overtake you on your way if she have ought for you in way of findings-out."

"Thank you, dear. I hope we don't prove harder to overtake than she seems to expect."

"Oh nay!" piped the smaller sister, anxious to put my mind at ease and ignoring a look from her elder, "our Ma's mickle quicker than you'll be, dear Dame—she can stomp flat the arse of a runnin' conney, can our Ma!"

I could not forbear to kiss their little cheeks goodbye—which they bore sweetly enough—thinking of my Persander as a little piper no larger than this small one, bragging to his friends of his mother's "thousing leagues" of travels.

Some five or so miles along, with the sun up and the Ribbonrill Valley now opening out to our right, it was coming on time to review our witch's map, for ahead I could descry a silver arc of the eastward highway, switchbacking down to cross the Vale, and it was now clear that we must in truth confirm our turnings before making them.

But how loath I was to look at the hated vellum, token of our dupe-dom! Doubtless we'd often been catspaws unknowing, but now it was too stingingly plain. And as I struggled with my anger, Nifft and Olombo at point signed a halt.

Here, angling towards us out of the grass, came four low, shambling figures, the lead one's lurching gestures plainly signalling a wish to parley with us.

They were like big, short-haired dogs whose forelegs have begun to be crude arms, with even cruder hands on them. They were blunter-eared than dogs; they were somewhat shorter-muzzled too, but easily as bigly tongued, said organ being carried at a canine dangle as they trotted. Their gait was ungraceful, a loping, bobbing jog that used only one of the forelegs to help them along. All four had some kind of sling, belt, or leather harness around neck or chest, supporting a holstered club, or hatchet, or sheathed shortsword hung under their ribs, so it appeared each held a foreleg free to use the weapon at need.

And for gesture too, the lead one making much play with his blunt paw as he neared us. We stood his approach at half-arms. With a crude salute—for he could not quite touch his paw to his head, the brute began a vigorous routine of gesture and utterance which was clearly intended as a communication. With his mouth full of dogteeth and wallowing tongue, and aimed as it was more groundwards than otherwise, his breathy, slobbery syllables were exceeding hard to distinguish. But at length we agreed that he was continually repeating the phrase: "snuff-meat, snuff-meat." At the same time, he kept making a grabbing gesture with his free hand (loosely so termed, for its dog-clawed fingers were only two joints long), and lifting his leg to exhibit to us the more clearly a bright red erection.

Whatever his specific proposal was, I could not help feeling its general tenor was unpromising. I made him a polite bow. "Thank you," I said, "but I think not. We are engaged, you see, on a nuncial mission."

He returned me a rapt gaze, tongue lolling, eyes vacant of comprehension. I tried again. "Thank you, but snuff-meat, *no*. No *want* snuff-meat. You understand?"

"In fact," said Mav's voice behind us, "it's no contemptible service these yapps are offering. It's I who recruited them out of the bush for you. Shall I translate?"

"Please do, my dear."

"The grabbing gesture is his question: Do you want to deal? Do business? *Snuff-meat* is his and his pack's service of nosing out things for you as you travel, specifically of nosing out A'Raks that might be a-near your line of march. It's us highlanders have cultivated this useful skill in them over the years, you see. And he's showing his spunk-bone there by way of expressing his eagerness to deal—he's saying he'll give you a good price, in short."

"Does one pay them in specie?" I could not help but ask, which made her smile.

"Nay—as you'll have noted they haven't fingers enough for handling coin well, though the main thing is they haven't the arithmetic. They're ready enough to accept money, except they know no one'll accept it of *them*, for they always quarrel with their change—pretending to understand, you see. One pays them with such hand-weapons as you see they favor, or with harness to sling them from."

The yapps—seeing a native interpret—were watching us at ease, tongues hanging patiently. Mav turned slightly away from them, and added a notch more softly, "In fact they'd fight best with their teeth, like the hounds they mostly still are, but they take great pride in being bipeds, and wielders of arms, and endure considerable inconvenience to maintain that illusion."

"They sound cheap at that price, dear Mav, if they enhance our security . . . but lacking their language, will we be able to take full advantage of their, ah, reconnaissance?"

"Well I'd come with you, you see, if you'd like—at no charge. For I've taken it into my mind that by going with you, I'll get to do what I've yet never done, for all my wanting to, which is to kill a godspawn of my own."

I felt with sudden certainty that she was not telling an untruth, but that it was a pretext, not her real reason for joining us. I somehow *knew* this woman, standing here giving me her level blue gaze, while keeping her own counsel from me. Or rather, I recognized her. She was just like a woman I had imagined many years ago. I mean the woman I had dreamed—in that

intricate way that mothers dream of such things—the woman I had dreamed that my precious wee Lilu would grow into, during those few months I had her to hold in my arms, and to dream on, before the fever took her.

I looked away—I hoped before she'd seen my eyes filling. I pretended to scan the visible fraction of the valley we'd soon be crossing. Clearing my throat, I said, "My dear, isn't it bad enough that our pious mission is a probable counterfeit, and may by itself procure us the gods' anger? Must we be *hunting* them as we go?"

Mav swept the lot of us with a quick, compassionate look that was, on balance, unsettling. "I've not spoken plainly enough, Nuncio," she gravely answered, "nor no one told you what the Choosing means. It's not just Grandaddy A'Rak gets his nibble in the stadium tonight. His sons big and small come crookedy-legging it out for a bite of man-meat as well. It's all unofficial and unacknowledged by the church of course, but it amounts to a feeding far worse than their usual nips-and-bits, here-and-there kind of hunting that goes on any normal night, and only the desperate are out on the highways tonight. The spawn I hope to kill will likeliest be one that comes hunting *us*."

Taking this in, I hissed, "That runty, foul, sorcering bitch!"

Not asking who I meant, Mav said, "Probably so . . . though it needs pointing out that the mere fact she's masked her aims does not prove they're ill ones. And as you mention her, have you eyed her map since last night?"

And indeed, the map had changed yet again. "Now once more we're to stay to the ridgeline, this time past the Murkside to the next valley north—what passes here?"

Mav looked pleased with the change. "Look you now—I was hoping for just such a switch as this. I believe that your client is learning the ground as she goes—probing by witchery from wherever she is for the lay of things as they unfold. For mark—I just learned from these fine Yapps here this very dawn that the Ribbonrill there she was having you to cross, is alive with spawn, such a mustering as the yapps have never nosed before. Whatever

she wants with you, it appears that she's trying to keep you alive. So. Am I invited?"

I was glad of her presence—we all were. She fell into pace with us—the yapps vanishing back into the grass to run scout far ahead.

"It was just this sort of fine summer's day," Mav said, "that I first saw an a'rak. I was a little fry of a half score years, and our Pa had us out pasturing with him. A dry year—we were grazing the flock lower down, for the greener grass at the forest fringes, down nearer the rivers. He'd sat us down with a loaf and a skin of milk, and gone a little way off after strays, leaving Danab my brother to watch me.

"The fringe of the forest was lush, all gaudy with flowers and woven with vines, and sparkling and darting with bees and nectarwasps and bumblebuzzers and needle-flies and moths with stained-glass wings. The flowers alone bedazzled me, for they grew so much sparser and smaller up on the ridges I was used to; here there were purple bells, and red-and-gold cartwheels, and lilies with crimson pistils shooting like fireworks from their white gullets. And all the bright insects added extra glory—like tiny angels rejoicing, they wove a rippling fabric round the leaves and flowers, embroidering the air.

"Then I noticed, among all the other winged things, some black bumblebuzzers of notable size. A cluster of them, just a little inside the thicket's leafy fringe. They hovered so still that they scarce seemed to move at all. Indeed, *did* they move at all? Was it just the leaves round them, stirred by the breeze, that moved? How intriguing, how odd that a cluster of such big black bumblebuzzers could hover so utterly still there!

"I was going to look closer when a slight sound distracted me—a tiny faint stir in the leafmold down under that hovering cluster. I had to look a moment before I saw it, through a little gap in the undergrowth's skirt—the cause of that little stir. It was an old Yapp lying on his side and staring fixedly out at me from his covert. He might have been napping, and just come full awake at seeing me. But no. This Yapp's eyes stared a little too

fiercely, somehow . . . indeed, his eyes were bulging almost out of his head! And this was because . . . impossibly, but yes! . . . because his face was growing even older as I watched. His skin was getting tighter and tighter before my eyes, his cheeks were caving in, I could see the bumps of his teeth growing stark under his dewlaps, that were themselves drawing tight as baked leather. . . . And even now his eyes were changing, turning dull as wax, and collapsing inward, becoming wrinkly little domes like dried snot. . . .

"I could not understand, how the Yapp grew so terribly old in just moments, till at last I saw what explained it. At last I saw them there in the side of this shrivelling old Yapp's neck: two long, black, polished shafts were rooted in his tendony mummy-neck. I'd heard of such shafts, such fangs, from Danab telling stories to scare me.

"Then did I raise my eyes back up to those hovering black bees, and saw them for the clustered spider-eyes they were. I was looking at one of the god-spawn as he fed, and he was looking back at me. . . .

"The Ribbonrill's quite the pretty valley, is it not?"

Mav's question may have meant some irony, but it was in fact a pretty valley indeed that now opened out full and fair on our right. The sun was risen high enough to bathe its western slopes, just under us, in gold, and the light etched far, tiny farmsteads and other buildings in perfect detail, and set the dew a-sparkle on the grassy slopes and thickets. What lent the prospect added drama was that just here the ridgeline, instead of sloping smoothly away on our right down into the valley, had a sheared face, falling off in a dramatic little precipice. And down some two hundred feet or so at its base —formed perhaps by the same unquietness in the earth that had sheared this escarpment—opened a wide ravine. This was choked with vegetation, no doubt from the springs or drainage the ravine channelled. This jungled gully ran all the way down the valley's flank to join the valleyfloor forest whose axis was the Ribbonrill River.

I was taking in this scenic anomaly, and trying to discern the distant structures—a few of them of imposing dimensions—on the valley floor just on the river's farther side, and so I failed to note that Nifft, entranced by something he spied in that same far prospect, had veered off from his position at point, and agilely scrambled up onto the knoll flanking the left side of the highway—the better to view what so excited him. He did not lag—would that he had!—but continued a jogging progress atop the knoll, half-mindful of his duty to remain at point while at the same time gratifying his curiosity.

"Ho, Mav!" he called back. "Yonder there just beyond the forest line! That octagonal dome of silvery stonework. Could that be one of the famous monastia?"

As such an ordinary appeal to one's visual acuity will automatically do, when we saw him—above and ahead of us—pointing, it drew all our eyes for a moment in the direction indicated. It was just in this moment, I judge, that Nifft's foot accidentally dislodged a stone from the knoll, which came jouncing unperceived down to the highway, which it impacted just as the 'shaw rolled up to the same point. It struck the pavement just behind Bantril and Shinn, and just in front of the 'shaw's left wheel, which jounced mightily upon encountering it, bucking with a high, rightwards twist. The wrenching thrust this imparted to the massive, polished coffin jetted it smoothly free of its lashings, and launched it—a glittering black missile—off the highway.

Time slowed, and, as if in a dream, I heard my own voice frostily informing our veiled client, back on Clummock's dock, that we were not in the habit of dropping the consignments entrusted to our delivery. In the same dreamlike daze, I saw myself in a lighting-quick series of glimpses—glimpses covering thirty years of nuncial duty—saw myself, I say, delivering scores of consignments, undropped consignments, consignments, many of them, not only undropped, but rescued from dozens of dangers, from dire adversities of climate, terrain, and environing entities. In the space of three heartbeats I saw my entire, theretofore unbesmirched nuncial career, as the jet-black coffin turned lazily, almost voluptuously, twice,

thrice in the golden morning air, before plunging, with a distant, leafy whisper, into the foliage-choked ravine two hundred feet below.

And when the green whelm had swallowed it, we all, as one, turned our eyes upon Nifft up on his knoll. I could almost see his thought: if he took to his heels on the instant, could he outrun us all?

I am to this moment sure that was his thought, but I must grant that he concealed it smoothly. Clearing his throat, he said, "There was no noise of impact. The foliage has caught it! Insofar as I have been the proximate cause of its . . . ejection, I alone will retrieve it!" And he bounded back down to the highway, and led off at a sprint.

What room was there for debate? He never looked back, and perhaps would have acted alone, but how could he doubt we would follow him?

The terrain demanded we advance to the highway's cross-valley branching, descend a little way down the slope by this, and cut back towards the precipice and ravine through the high grass. The Ephesionite stayed well in our lead; though good-hearted Olombo struggled to keep up and share the dangers of point position with him, he was less nimble than the lean vagabond, and Nifft, spear at port arms, cleaved the breast-high grass with an admirable lack of hesitation, considering what it might conceal. But by then Mav's whistling had brought our squad of yapps back to us, and though the meadow submerged them, their wakes in the grassy whelm soon branched ahead of Nifft. We were all glad of their forerunning us as we pressed towards the jungled ravine.

In sum, we had the better part of a league's toilsome footwork just in returning to a point some hundreds of feet below where our consignment had been—in the Ephesionite's term—'ejected,' and the sun hung much higher before our work of retrieval had even begun.

And it was hellish work. The green canopy that choked it had masked the depth of this gorge, and the cruel pitch of its walls. And steep though these were, they grew as thick with gnarl-rooted trunks as a beast's hide with fur,

while prickly vines and thorny shrubs bewebbed what little groundspace lay between.

But first we must work our way to the gorge's floor, for it was possible that a waterway or a bog had been what silenced our coffin's plunge. Our swords became bush-axes, and all our speech became the curses of prickly, slippery toil as we hacked and slithered our way down into this vile green crotch of hypertrophic vegetation—but *whispered* curses, *muttered* curses, for this was spiderspawn terrain, and our ears were as alert as ears could be.

The ravine-floor offered a moderate little tunnel of open space, evidence that a sizeable stream ran here in the rainy season. At present, a meager, spring-fed ghyll gurgled down the rocky course.

"If it had struck this bed, we would have heard it shatter," Mav murmured. "It's hung up in the canopy somewhere anear above us here—it must be. It dove in near center-wise to the gorge, a shade more upslope than here perhaps, but not much, and its impact might have thrown it lateral amidst treetops lower down. Let us move upgully a bit to make sure, fan out up either slope here, and start working downhill a-studying the treetops. The sun will help more as it climbs."

But so dense was the puzzle of bough and leaf above us, that the sun seemed to add little more than a shifty bedazzlement, as we struggled with the impossible footing, peering and squinting overhead, our ears a-quiver all the while to the mutter and whisper of the green hell engulfing us.

We were at it an hour, two hours, three. Time became a quagmire we sank in, each hour we'd spent making the next seem less real, less conceivable. We combed fully half a mile of ravine, then combed it again retracing our steps.

Mav, working just within sight of me, received a communication from one of the yapps, who were patrolling our perimeter with an ever more visible unease. She signalled me with a fierce "*Sssst!*"—a communication whose wordless eloquence we relayed up and down our line, all of us freezing

dead still, and remaining so through long, long minutes that stretched towards yet another hour's duration.

In that green delirium of shifty, whispery jungle, it was at first impossible to disentangle fancy from actual sensation. But in the course of that long paralysis, a clear sense of my own body's boundaries evaporated, and a sensation of *otherness*, stealthily on the move, began to filter down to me. Things were ticklishly, tiptoeingly afoot—not far off, and on all sides of us: a sneaky, skittery scuttle, almost inaudible, as here, there, and yonder, alien presences advanced.

What at length made me certain of the reality of these subtle stirrings was how clearly I felt it when they had passed and gone: a sense of deliverance from terror, delicate but piercing, marked the departure of the last of the godspawn from our vicinity. I convoked our party in the ravine bottom to confer.

"They weren't mickle close," Mav told us, "or they'd have sensed us here. It was their manyness made them so palpable. I must tell you, it's not their way to move in the mass like that—almost in formation they seemed, a-seeking together for something . . . *hsst!*"

But we'd all heard it: a weighty slither, a rustly shifting of something quite near.

"It was overhead," whispered Nifft, and so it proved. For when we had scanned the canopy for but a moment, there, a hundred feet above us, brought by its slippage into a little beam of sunlight which threw in sharp relief a little patch of the carving that adorned it, hung our lost coffin, delicately poised in the support of a forked bough.

Our toil was far from ended. Stout line we did not lack, and agile Bantril, lightest of our crew, climbed most limberly aloft with it. But a good two rods below the prize he found the boughs too supple to withstand his added weight, and he must needs painstakingly attempt the lassoing of the casket from below. His perch was awkward in the extreme, and clear space for the cast almost nonexistent. Again and again he tried with more than human

calm and concentration, and at long last snagged his loop around the coffin's narrow foot-end.

How gently he tugged to secure the ligature! It made no difference. The box, more delicately poised than we had guessed, was instantly dislodged, slid free, and plunged. Bantril desperately anchored his line, but its slender grip on the casket sufficed only to pull it short for an instant some fifty feet above the ground, whence it broke free and was set a-tumbling for the rest of its fall. The box split lengthwise on impact, like a seedpod, and something pale and slender rolled out of it handily and skittered along the watercourse, coming to rest upon a tangle of dank roots, enigmatic, of course, as were so many other aspects of our journeyings. I do not think any of us were more than mildly surprised.

We gathered round it where it came to rest: not an embalmed businessman, purple and pungent with spices. The thing was as big as a big man, but what it most resembled was an artfully carven sarcophagus, a slender ellipsoid, gracefully tapered at both ends, apparently seamless, and fashioned of a smooth, lustrous material. Its color was rich and various, a grainy mottling of hues suggesting the whole spectrum of polished woods, but the material itself was not wood, was rather slightly flexible to the finger's pressure. A graceful, symmetrical ribbing circumferenced it, molded—or carven?—with high art.

It fell to me, of course, to articulate our duty at this strange pass. "That we were deceived, my friends, we knew. Even had our mishandling"—I said "our," but spared a glance here at Nifft, who met it blankly—"not put us in the wrong with our client, I would still adjudge us beholden to discharge our delivery of the supposititious `deceased' according to our contractual terms. Our nuncial honor, gentlemen, is a thing apart from the honor of our clients. Need any more be said? Speak, whoso thinks it."

It was Mav who spoke. "Will you consult your chart once more before I speak my mind, good Nuncio?"

The map had changed yet again. "Once more it directs us to make our eastward crossing here, through the Ribbonrill!"

"Indeed, I thought it might!" said Mav, a strange excitement in her pale blue eyes. "I'll not say all I think—it's still unsure. But I will wager, though you're lied to in some matters, that your mission is very far from ill or unworthy. Nor do I think it pure accident—or rather, pure mishandling—that your cargo here was perched so high above the earth, and yourselves hid so deep in the greenery, just when that wave of spawn should pass a-seeking something. Finally, you'll note they passed up-valley. Now, with the sun a-westering so fast, and dark again anear, and the vale cleared as it were, are we not after all safest to quickfoot it cross the Ribbonrill here, and be working upslope again by the darkfall? That map and its maker are still bent to your safety, I'm saying, and I believe we should gently box this back up and be footing it fast."

And so we did, though it took the best part of another hour to re-casket our strange consignment, bandage the broken box together with ligatures of line, haul it from the ravine, reload it on our 'shaw, and make our way back to the cross-valley highway.

By the time we had pavement again underfoot, the sun hung scarce three spans above the western hills.

We flew, winged with our urgency to reach and cross the valleybottom woods before dark fell. Thickets and copses, outliers of the forest zone ahead, threw long shadows, pointing darkly towards the gloomy boskage we must traverse. When travelling with the "widow" two days before, we had encountered valley-folk enough abroad at this same hour. Now we saw not a soul in fold or field, and the farmsteads we passed in close view of were shut and shuttered up tight. We passed only one man driving a laden hay-wain, and he was whipping his plods to a lather to get his load to the barn and himself inside his own four walls.

The western ridgeline had just swallowed the sun as we came to the edge of the forest proper. Now the trees crowded up to the highway, and their

crowns leaned close to touching overhead. We began to hear the river ahead, and feel the humid breath of it. We ran the faster, so strong was our impulse to recoil and withdraw.

In moments, the forest canopy made an unbroken roof above us, and wrapped us in its green gloom, in its fragrances and its whispers, in insect-song and the fine-drawn, woven cries of dusk-hunting birds. The forest chill seeped through our sweated clothes, and as the sun's afterglow swiftly paled, a creaky note of frogs and crickets grew shrill in the wood-song.

And there, after a curve, was the river, a broad stream of sinewy black water hastening between the forest walls, bridged, as it happened, with a structure clearly rudimentary, and very old, but haply sound enough. The gap in the forest was wide enough that a narrow strip of open sky roofed it, and the sky's iron gray told us that full dark would fall on us before we had quite cleared the woods' farther fringe.

We had put bridge and river, and a half mile of forest behind us when, just as the light was failing, three of our yapps, who had been running scout before us, came stumbling back in a panic. Slobberingly, they crowded round Mav with their news, which sounded like: "Took-under, took-under!"

"Don't pause, but go wary, I'll catch ye!" Mav cried, and indeed we had not paused, but kept running, as one does in nightmares, with the dark terrain one toils to escape eerily expanding about one. It was madly illogical to haste toward whatever recent catastrophe the beasts were retreating from, but no amount of deliberation would have changed our duty to advance, nor have changed the overall need to gain higher, clearer ground and emerge from these jungly ambuscades while some iota of light still remained. On we ran, and in two turns Mav and the yapps had vanished behind us.

We ran, wheels gritting over fog-wet flagstone, ran through wraiths of river-mist ghosting slowly across our path, ran as the darkness congealed to a tarry blackness—still ran, and—lo!—felt the grade a-rising underfoot, and found the forest thinning out to either side. Here at last were the clear slopes opening out ahead, their rolling breadth faintly limned in the light of the

earliest stars, and by a silver premonition in the east of a near-full moon's rise from the ridgeline above us.

"Lively," I sang out in my relief. "We will rest up on yonder heights!"

And relief winged us all. Our feet flew, and the 'shaw's wheels sang. From the trees behind us the river-mist thrust out in irregular tongues and fingers that lay across the highway, and through these we tore and emerged, trailing tatters of fog from our shoulders and spearpoints. On we sped, shedding the horror of the dark woods with each stride.

Then, just ahead, from a thicket of vine-shrouded trees enmeshed in the ghostly vapors, a billow of mist bulged out across the road, a slow gust of fog unmistakably displaced by some massive movement just within the grove.

And with this swell of mist came a word, an utterance. Not a spoken word. More like a thought, a whispery pressure that touched my spine directly with its meaning:

Stop.

Nifft and Olombo, at point, stopped hard just short of the grove, and the rest of us froze behind them. And out of the fog-cocooned trees it came dainty-footing: a shaggy black spider twice the size of a war chariot with its team in the traces. The fog wet its tiered black eyeknobs oily-bright, and covered its shaggy black fur with dewy diamonds; its palps made finicking little fussings round the glossy, dire sabres of its fangs. Again its thought muscled through the air and inhabited our minds:

Travellers, your tread pains me—you weigh strangely heavy on my Father's earth. What folk are you? Say your errand here.

I marvelled at my own voice's steadiness. "We are a Nuncial party, and make lawful delivery of our charge, a deceased Hagian citizen, to the A'Rak-Fane Endon-Thioz."

I know not this fane, but this man, this man here. . . .

The spider lifted its palps and tickled the air towards Nifft. Its delicate little gestures were curiously expressive of dawning indignation, an emotion which appeared to swell into outrage even as we watched, for now the spider reared up all four of its forelegs, and its thought came with a tremor of wrath: *You! You come defiant of our primal law! You are a thief! Your aura blazons it! A thief plain and simple! A thief to the bone!*

Nifft was stepping back off the road, and spreading his arms protestingly, disarmingly, his spear seemingly forgotten in his hand. "You wrong me, godling!" he cried. "You wrong me utterly! You *wound* me and wrong me with these ungenerous allegations!"

I cannot err in this came the spider's inexorable murmur in our minds. *You are a thief . . . and the rest of your party are . . . something worse than thieves, besides. . . .* The creature's mist-wet fur glinted as it stole a little closer to all of us.

Nifft, backing another careful step upslope, cried, "I must confess the truth, I see!" He opened his arms wider, as if to demonstrate how strenuously he embraced the truth, and incidentally, I noticed, cocking his spear back a bit higher above his head. "Elsewhere, Godling," Nifft urged in earnest tones, "it is true that I have cultivated the art of felonious appropriation, which closely resembles what might loosely be termed `thieving.' But that was another life, in other places! Surely your divine sense of justice forbids—not thieveries past and elsewhere—but only thieveries practised here in Hagia. And all intent of such I do most strenuously disavow! The bare thought of stealing anything here—"

And just here, Nifft made his cast. It surprised even me, who expected it, with its smooth power. Even the godspawn's inhuman quickness failed to save it, for though it launched its counter-leap in the very instant of Nifft's cast, before its hooked feet could leave the earth his spear had pierced its bristly maw just underneath the fangs, and sunk on through to bury half its length in the turf beneath. Olombo's lance thrust through its eyeknobs a half

breath after, and here was I, a beat behind, with a sweep of my sword that sheared its two fangs off at the root.

Its great arched legs still pumped and struggled, but the two spears held it pinned while we began to shear those legs off one by one. Soon its huge, obscenely swollen abdomen flopped impotently upon the gore-spattered grass. Just then we heard Mav's voice, nearing fast, high with glee:

"Well done and better than well done, oh peerless, princely nuncials! Leave me a killing stroke, I beg you, leave me the finish, there's something to be done to kill it proper!"

We made way for her and she leapt upon its flat foresection to which all its legs—now bleeding stumps—were jointed. "See how near dead it is?" she exulted, kicking its flaccid abdomen. "Gods? Ptah! They are alien monsters merely, and oh, what joy it is to slay them!"

"Let's make for the ridgeline now," I urged, "and quick about it. I want no more of such work as this tonight."

"First," said Mav, "let's free at least what stolen life we may, for if this brute's brothers, or his sire, come on him, they will devour him, and possess those stolen lives." Her sunder glinted as she unsheathed its cruel hooked blade but, looking then from one to the other of us, her hand paused. "I see you have come to our land knowing less than naught of the monsters that rule it. List you then:

"Grandsire A'Rak is supreme in power. He spawns without breeding. His offspring bud from his great frame and fall off him like leggy fruit to scuttle out into the valleys, and hunt and feed and grow on their own. The *use* of these spawn to old Grandsire, is that all they devour, and all they learn, goes back to him when he devours them—which he does, every one of them sooner or later, once they grow large enough to begin to amount to a threat to him. One this size here would be due in a dozen summers more I ween. This and his like all go back to augment Grandaddy's huge flesh, and feed his knowledge of his wide domain.

"But now, ruined as this one is, he would be devoured by the first of his brothers that found him—and all the gathered ghosts of his prey that now fill his sacs, these would be taken into another monster's guts. It is this we can prevent, by doing thus!"

She leapt then from the amputated carcass, and hurried round to the great abdomen's caudal tapering. Here her sunder glinted repeatedly as she hacked the furry bulb wide open, splitting the spinnerettes and releasing a great spill of intricate, whorled innards, among which big translucent bulbs of white were nested—the monster's silk-sacs.

Mav held her dripping blade aloft. "Be free, ye hoarded spirits!" she shrilled, and with two mighty strokes, slashed the sacs open.

An invisible turmoil filled the air—it bulged and roiled, a turbulent nothingness muscling the breeze about us. We cringed within this swift outwelling, for it smote us with bursts of thought and sensation that blotted our minds out. Within this welter I was not I, but I was a wintry moon watched rising over a frosty forest, was a childbirth pang in a bed of sweat and joy, was a line of song in a tongue I do not know, was a lingering kiss, was a knife-fighter stabbing a stranger his deathblow, was a child in her loving father's arms, was a city viewed in purple dusk all jeweled with lamps, was a shout in the street, was a sweetly remembered gust of summer breeze. . . .

And then we stood, ourselves again, all stilled by awe and sadness, till the Ephesionite (curse him, I had *guessed* him for a thief, yet would not credit it!) said the strangest thing, in a quiet, bemused tone:

"Let the A'Rak's web be woven, the ghost-web he's been wont to weave. . . ."

But I had no patience for interrogation of this man—unlucky addition to our crew, in every way unlucky, as I saw it then! "What of our yapps?" I asked Mav.

"Their leader's spawnfood—they'll not run in the van while it's dark—too many ahead, they say—so they'll trail us till daybreak, if we live that long. I say trust the map and push on."

"I say push on we must—it is our nuncial duty. To the ridgeline!" I cried. And we footed it with a will, none of us loath to leave this hideous corpse that we had made, and all of us exultant and heartened by the fact that we'd made it a corpse.

NIFFT V

When the lottery known as the Choosing is held on Shortest Night, up in the Stadium in the crags above Big Quay, the Three Thousand—those citizens whose fate it is, according to the annual census, to stand the Choice that year—go up to the stadium after sunset, in a procession you may be sure is solemn enough. Within the corridors of the stadium, they are channelled through an array of little dressing rooms, each citizen passing singly through his designated room, where Bailiffs robe and hood him. Each is sent robed out into the arena before another is brought into a given room. As the assembly grows in the arena, under the gradually thickening stars, each of the Three Thousand is presumably unknown to his neighbors.

You will have gathered, old friend, that I here—as before—supply in its chronological place an account I myself was not possessed of till after the event. Since the robing of the Three Thousand begins at full dark—or when, by canonical prescription, "a score of stars do blaze distinct on high"—the events I now present began just about exactly when my spearcast put paid to the account of the accusatory A'Rakspawn we encountered in the Ribbonrill Valley. Whatever the other deficiencies of Dame Lagademe's narrative, I find she has had the rectitude to report in full the characteristic precision and panache of that spearcast of mine. Naturally, with respect to those divagations on ethical and moral quiddities, and reflections upon my own conduct, which mar her narrative, I will continue to preserve a manly and forbearing silence.

(. . .)

(. . .)

The Three Thousand, then, once assembled on the torchlit sand, are meant to be anonymized. But though their hoods' eyeholes be small, and their robes hang to the feet, complete anonymity is never achieved. Shoved-back sleeves show bracelets or tattoos, and a man will readily know his cousin or his neighbor by little more than a bit of his brow glimpsed through an

eyehole, or by a note of her voice when talk runs through the hooded throng after a sigil is drawn, and those who are freed by that rune cry relieved encouragements to the remnant that must wait a further drawing, while those remaining call brave congratulations to the saved, and promise to join them in safety when the next sigil drawn is their own. There is, then, much mutual recognition among the Three Thousand despite their hoods and robes.

But it is the ingenuity of this rite's design that those who have drawn freedom, when they retire to the arena's perimeter, must take up ceremonial cudgels and assume the duty of all the Exempted, which is to aid the Bailiffs and Reeves in driving the Chosen Ones out through the great brazen A'Rak Gate when the moment of their sacrifice arrives. At that juncture the Exempted, you may be sure, are glad of their robes and hoods; they willingly embrace their facelessness then, and are grateful for the heavy veil of office that conceals them from the friends and kin they must drive weeping to the shaggy monster's fangs.

Paanja Pandagon stood with Fursten Minim on the ceremonial proscenium mounted on the stadium wall just to one side of the A'Rak Gate. The pair shared not even a glance as they watched the hooded throng filter into the arena below them, for they feared that their pity, their horror, their shame, must leap visibly forth on their faces if their eyes should meet. Perhaps a hundred souls to die tonight! Time out of mind, a score at most was the life-toll levied by the god.

I know they judged themselves more harshly than would any rational witness of their dilemma. The god had solicited of them what he might as easily have compelled. Meanwhile, by his assumed obsequious compliance, Pandagon had purchased the A'Rak's complacent trust, and a military stipend which the two old comrades had already set a-working. I won't anticipate my tale, dear Shag, but surely, one particular military use of titanoplods shod with squashers will have, by now, occurred to you.

But for this night, Paanja and Fursten must act the executioners, and purchase with the blood of their townsfellows the means and time with

which to—dare they hope it?—aid the spidergod's overthrow for good and all. Their preparations to this end caused no small stir among the hooded throng as it collected on the sand, and grew aware that they were surrounded, not merely by the Hundred-Twenty—Bailiffs and Reeves—but by a muster of two hundred foreign mercenaries as well, knout-and-net men, the troops of choice for quelling crowds in riot.

This unprecedented change in protocol could not fail to seem of sinister import to those who stood upon the sand tonight. Pandagon quelled their swelling murmur with the cry: "Now let the runes be drawn, Ye given-to-the-god!"

A squad of Sextons flanked the great urn of mingled runes planted on the sand in mid-arena, and they now directed the filing-past of the hooded host. Each of these, when he had drawn, tucked his copper chit into a special fold upon the forehead of his hood, so that he wore plain to the eyes of all the rune chance had allotted him.

So many little tricks for luck did the people use in drawing their runes! Some turned and reached in backwards; some genuflected before drawing, or knelt and drew on their knees; some spun thrice leftwards, or twice rightwards, or gestured strangely, or muttered spells ere they drew. Rhymed prayers, special placings of the feet—every kind of pathetic little magic was seen, till at last the Three Thousand stood, runed and waiting for the draw.

Paanja Pandagon thrust his hand into the cull-box. Protocol required him, of course, to draw only at the last those runes whose burning touch advised him they were death runes. With ginger fingers, he found and drew a cool, unvenomed chit. Reading it, he boomed aloud:

"Holders of the Ha'gaf rune, now retire, your duty's done!"

A surflike roar rolled through the hooded host, an irrepressible groan of jubilation, damped almost as it erupted out of sympathy for neighbors still at risk. But a hubbub of congratulations followed, of jaunty cries from those who still stood the chance, and encouragements were called back by those now freed, as they retired to the arena's perimeter, received their cudgels, and joined the surround of Bailiffs, Reeves and mercenaries. Thus were perhaps four hundred spared in one stroke.

In the regathered silence, Pandagon drew again, again intoned:

"Holders of the Ga'lad rune, now retire, your duty's done!"

There was some wonder mixed in the second hubbub, for perhaps five hundred people appeared to hold the Ga'lad rune. The lottery, usually involving half a score of runes, had never before proceeded by such broad strokes. Again the saved withdrew, the silence settled, though a silence nibbled round the edges by a dawning sense of the extraordinary.

"Holders of the Lapta Rune, now retire, your duty's done!"

Five hundred more souls were freed by this third stroke. The bustle of their retiring had relief in it.

Paanja Pandagon, reaching into the box, discovered with a sick thrill that only two runes remained in it, one of them venomously hot to the touch. As he drew the cool one, his heart was already hammering with premonition:

"Ye holders of the Uruk rune, now retire, your duty's done!"

This rune released perhaps a hundred souls! Now at last the Ecclesiarch understood the treacherous ambiguity of the A'Rak's words, ". . . *more* than five times . . ." His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He could not proceed with this vast homicide.

But it was then that he and Fursten Minim saw from their high perch something that the rest, absorbed in their expectation of a half dozen more runes to come, had not yet noted. And so he seized the last poison-hot chit, and thrust it high, and cried, his words a metered moan:

"Ye holders of the Nalga Rune, your duty falls upon ye soon, for now your lives are A'Rak's own."

The entire remaining host now boiled with turmoil. Fifteen hundred souls had drawn the death! Surely riot would have won the day, except for that advent which the pair on their proscenium had already seen, and which now was discovered, with a shout of horror, by the entire stadium.

For over the crest of that stadium, topping the oval wall at every point, A'Rakspawn now scuttled, two hundred of them at the least, the smallest as big as a coach-and-four. Down the empty tiers they came dainty-footing until they formed an outermost perimeter, containing Bailiffs, mercenaries, Exempted—all! There the shaggy nightmares stood at ready, palps lifted, as a rolling tidal wave of spiderthought filled the arena.

It was not the thought of these lesser monsters. Its power declared it to be the ideation of One greater than them all, one who stood as yet unseen, but —plainly, from the thrust of its current—just outside the giant brazen valves of the A'Rak Gate.

Stand fast, ye Faithful, oh ye dear devoted in my worship! Know ye my grief that this terrible tax must be taken, but a monstrous foe bears even now towards our imperiled nation, and I must be armed with strength in the battle at hand! What you render shall be wholly painless—easeful as sleep, as a dream—this I swear ye! As for the Exempted, and all of your countrymen, in sign of my sadness at war's dire demands, on the next dawn but one, out in Keelyard Square, a hundred million gold lictors, in one immense donative, shall I disburse among ye. A paltry indemnity for loved lives sacrificed—how well I know this! But in some wise 'twill signal my grief, and my love of ye. Bailiffs! Exempted! Stand by our Covenant! Stand ready for what I shall bid ye!

Metal groaned. The great brazen valves of the A'Rak's Gate gaped slowly open, and through their widening aperture fell ruddy torchlight from the crags outside. The stunned assembly gasped, and moaned aloud.

Just outside the stadium the crags were forested with torches and, immense in their midst, ablaze with their light, there crouched great A'Rak himself. Vast shaggy machine of implacable carnivorous appetite! His many tiered eyes were as soulless as polished gemstones, coldly alight with an immortal hunger. The great gates were too small to admit his hugeness, but, risen, he could plainly overstep the coliseum's walls, and stand within.

But he did not move. His utter immobility, like a command, held the human host completely paralyzed. Paanja, in his perfect terror's trance, grasped—slowly, slowly—that the torches burning all around the god showed *through* his body. That the god's entire body was perfectly translucent. Legs, midsection, abdomen, the torches glimmered through every part. Every part was empty. It was a husk. It was a *moulting* of the god.

Behold my emptied flesh. My vacant image.

This whelm of utterance rippled from a new direction. As one, the human host turned. And there, cresting the stadium's eastern rim, came the A'Rak indeed, gingerfooting down till his splayed legs spanned the whole tiered

wall from top to bottom, dwarfing his issue where they stood ranged before him.

The god's shaggy-sleeved fangs stirred daintily. His ancient mind breathed delicately through the host of human minds, and his will was instantly, intricately understood.

Oh my Chosen Ones, mount my empty flesh, enter inside it, and by this gesture of devout submission your painless sleep is purchased—your placid, dreamlike, tranquil passage to my service is achieved. Advance now, never hesitate! Delay's impiety! 'Tis heresy! Make haste, and I'll not feed on one of you!

The dire luster of his eyes' black moons shone down upon them all, pitiless, unreadable.

"Great is the god's mercy!" Paanja shrieked. He knew now that all that came from the god was doubleness, mendacity, but he also knew that here was a vast homicide *already achieved*, and that an added thousand lives hung upon his now displaying a gullible piety, and an unaltered devotion to his monstrous master. Tears ran from his eyes as he cried it out, voice cracking: "All praise to merciful A'Rak! Bailiffs and Reeves, help them forward! Ye men-at-arms and ye Exempted ones! Forward! Aid the Chosen to their rightful duty!"

And they all lurched groaning forward, that ring of armed ones whose sole —but so compelling!—inducement to this dire work was that they themselves would not suffer what they inflicted. Almost as stunned and halting as those they herded, the armed folk crowded the Chosen host forward, the spawn-ring closing round them as they went and adding an impetus that was decisive in moving even so great a mass of the doomed toward their fate.

The Chosen ones ripped off their hoods as they went, showed their faces and shrieked appeals to known or loved ones they knew to be somewhere in the crowd of their compellers, but forth they must go and forth they went, all tears and helpless cries. And over them all loomed A'Rak who was their

lowering sky, whose will was a silent hurricane that moved both sacrificers and the sacrificed alike.

With what loathing did human hands grip and clamber up the legs of that mighty effigy—guards and doomed alike! There was a great split in the cephalothorax and the dorsum of the abdomen alike, and through this long aperture dropped the herded Chosen. The Bailiffs and other warders, maddened by the loathsome strangeness of the work, began to execute it with an hysterical ferocity—hoisting, hauling, dragging their neighbors up the bristly legs, hurling them into the translucent chambers of thorax and abdomen. As the warders began to outnumber the Chosen still outside, they manhandled them ever more fiercely and efficiently, and as the numbers within the moult rose to the hundreds, the first of those imprisoned began to be displaced by the pressure of the squirming doomed, and to fall down the hollow, tree-thick shafts of the jointed legs.

As they slipped and tumbled down, branching through the hellish husk, their faces of awe and dread, all distorted by their chitinous container, still were visible as twisted, inhumanly warped masks, and these expressions seemed like A'Rakian mockery, a spiderish parody of human woe and pain.

The great husk began to sag, crouch lower with the growing weight, which made the hoisting up and the insertion of the Chosen easier, while the fever to be done with the horror still grew on their neighbors, until, almost suddenly, it seemed, the hellish work was done, the Bailiffs, Reeves, Exempted, and mercenaries had jumped down and withdrawn, and there stood the moulting crammed with human contents, the great hollow planet of the abdominal bulb a little world of blurred, mute-mouthing faces, the legs great crooked columns spliced from hundreds of separately writhing human legs and arms.

Again the god spoke:

You have done well. Let all retire now save the priests of my temple. Return ye to your homes, your beds, and on the next morn from tomorrow's, expect my golden gratitude.

They ran. Exempted, Bailiffs, mercenaries alike. They were gone like autumn leaves before the gale—gone even before, it seemed, the forgotten clubs and swords they dropped had settled on the empty, trampled sand. As swiftly gone were the circled spawn—they scuttled out the A'Rak Gate and melted away among the crags. The god breathed his will, and all vanished, save the two churchmen on their high ceremonial perch.

When the god stepped ginger-footing down to the arena—which he all but filled—Paanja and Fursten found themselves at a level with the topmost tier of his eye-globes; they could see the torchlight kindling the exquisite facetings of those huge black gems.

Pious prelates, upon you only falls the burthen of beholding your deity's dire extremity. Bear up strongly now beneath the weight of what you must witness.

The titanic spider crouched, and sprang into the air, vaulting the stadium wall, and landing poised beside his bulging husk, his simulacrum seething, shuddering with the struggles of its captive contents. What warped masks of horror now did mouth and grimace through that moult's distortive transparency! And when the A'Rak reared his fangs on high, the great black barbs unsleeved and tipped with bulging drops of golden venom, what a muffled wail seeped from that colossal casting!

Down plunged his fangs. Again! Again and yet again! Every part of his own effigy he pierced, and where each stroke fell, golden effusions of venom flooded the husk. The amber liquid was a potent caustic—naught save the husk itself was proof against it. The human throng, amid a muffled shrieking past description, became a human jam of melting flesh, corroding bone, and smoking garments.

With tears unstoppably streaming down their own faces, the churchmen watched the faces of their countrymen and countrywomen swell and melt in clouds of crimson filaments, eyes bursting into whitish puffs, clawing hands and kicking feet unfleshed in rosy smoke and falling still. In moments the

moult was a ghastly vessel filled with human soup, which the monster crouched upon, and set to draining with his bristly maw.

Now prelates, do you comprehend my need, and thence deduce the depth of my necessity? Ecclesiarch, attend mine altar at sunrise, but before then, make known throughout the city that no ship now docked anent my quay is to depart her moorage until my leave is given, the which it shall not be until my donative—of purest gold—has been distributed, particulars of which thou'lt have tomorrow. . . .

This flux of otherworldly mentation had for its unspeakable accompaniment the spectacle of the alien colossus draining his own image of its human beverage. Both men grasped that the god, in making them witness his feasting, was communicating more than what his thought articulated, though now he all but uttered this unspoken message.

Report tomorrow your martial preparations on my behalf, Priest. I here show thee what atrocity I will embrace at need, that both of ye may know from what ye are exempted, if ye in faithful diligence do my behests. Absolute exemption is your meed, and after that, my danger being past, power supreme, and exaltation above all others of this nation. I do dismiss ye—go in peace.

* * *

They left the god a-feeding, and descended the deserted walkway to the foot of the crags. On legs numbed and unsteady they trod the emptied streets of the city. All was silence in the nighted lanes and boulevards, a silence which for both the churchmen was deafening with remembered screams, while the emptiness they walked through swarmed and seethed with remembered images of horror.

But as their senses in some degree shook off this stunned remembrance, they became aware of an underlayer of fevered business to this emptiness, of fevered whisperings to this silence. The houses—where many a furtive light winked from crevices in shuttered windows—were secretly alive with the news of A'Rak's hecatomb. Terror was abroad in Big Quay.

The two friends saw that the whole metropolis was poised on a cusp of danger—that panic must breed slaughter, while control might channel this horror into fighting spirit. They remembered their own hopeful resolutions then—resolutions whispered how softly, how cautiously between them!—and it helped them to regain that earlier resolve. They began to speak in a careful murmur.

The upshot of their colloquy was that they turned their steps towards a destination unheard-of, in the normal course of things, for either of them. They wound their way to the porte-cochere of one of Big Quay's grandest manses, a place that Fursten Minim had not visited for nearly twenty years, albeit it was the residence of Fursten Major, his father.

Though so long out of contact with his parent, the son did not fear to find that licentious old croesus abed, though it was the very pit of night. Or, if old Fursten Major was abed, it would not be a-sleeping. And indeed, when the night porter had carried in the prelates' names, they were speedily conveyed to the chambers of that execrable old patriarch. On their passage thither, their steps resounded on polished marble down halls athrong with gaudy, costly canvases and statuary that ranged in theme from prurient to pornographic. Fursten Minim's jaw was clenched and his gaze fixed straight ahead, while Paanja gave his shoulder a grip of mute allegiance and affection.

Fursten Major was Old Guard, Old Money. Besides his warehouses he owned a controlling interest in one of Hagia's largest Monastia; his hand had for a lifetime wielded the wand of wealth that A'Rak had bestowed upon their nation. He was, in a sense, an old crony of the god's, though he had never beheld A'Rak, being one of those citizens of means so vast he had been able to purchase the almost unpurchasable: a substitute to stand his place at the Choosing, when his turn came round. Of late, as his corpulence and venereal afflictions edged him ever nearer death, old Major slept less and less, slept scarcely at all, but lay as Paanja and his son now found him, in his vast bed, fanned by comely catamites loinclothed in satin, a tray of wines and drugs within the reach of his blotched and swollen hands, and naked dancers and musicians performing for him, with slow and strenuous

undulation, dances designed to wake the old man's inextinguishable—but now incapable—lust.

"Little churchmice! Come sit on my bed!" Old Major's voice was the sprightly tenor of a younger, healthier man. "It's Paanja, is it not? First among churchmice? Old Kurttle's nephew. And my own little prig, sprig of my loins! He's still not forgiven me for sodomizing him a time or thrice when he was small and comely, and not the wiry-whiskered brutish block he's grown to! There there, my Minnie! Be reconciled to your doting Daddums! After all, is not fatherly affection esteemed by all the world? Come sit on my bed!"

Though Minor had been braced for this, he surprised himself with a response that he had not intended: he hawked a gob of spittle, and spat it on his father's satin coverlet. Then he and Paanja, trading a little smile, offered old Major a frigid, smiling bow in unison.

The old monster lived far outside the shams of decency, but his anger now showed that he deemed outrageous behaviour to be his own, not others' prerogative. From his swollen face, beaded with the little buds of poxworms, his little eyes looked out with a dangerous black glitter. His lips trembled with wrath (the reddish lesions of some other disease were constellated round his mouth, like stains from a blood-meal) and he bellowed for his bodyguard. A pair of Kolodrian wrestlers waddled fiercely into the chamber, scattering squeaking catamites from their path. The two friends coolly turned, moving their cloaks aside from their shortswords, and Paanja addressed them with lordly insolence. "My lord the A'Rak hungers still, and I am sent to choose him further food. Do ye come to volunteer, my fine fellows?"

News that had not yet reached their master was, plainly, current in the servants' quarters. The ruffians dropped in terror to their knees, and squeaked their supplications. "Instruct your master in the current state of things," Fursten Minim ordered them, "and then quit this chamber on the instant. You there! Out! Out, or you will feed our god!" This promptly cleared the chamber of its acrobatic ecdysiasts. Fursten Minim picked up

his father's tray of powders and potations, and casually dumped it on the floor. When the bodyguard had scuttled bowing off, they faced the old magnate again.

Old Major's gaze, though it glittered with new calculation, was unabashed. He chose to strike an attitude of brittle glee: "You witless babes!" he crowed. "Are you shocked at this turn of events? Shaken? I marvel it's not happened sooner! What sort of being do you conceive that we stand covenanted with, we of Hagia, this two hundred years and more? The A'Rak's heart is a hot coal of appetite; his will is to drain all lives into his own; his procreation is a barren budding—his simulacra swell from his flesh and fall to scuttle off and feed as he does, a mere multiplication of his central gluttony, you see, for when they've fed fat he summons them and devours them, possessing thus all that *they* have hunted down. He is a vortex of hunger, and the soul of his victims he doth appropriate along with their flesh, and his mind is thus a labyrinth of captured lives, all they have sensed and seen, sung and suffered, compose his garden of millennial span; he knits the web of his inner empire from the hosts he has butchered.

"We are told there are great black suns that suck in other suns, and augment their murky furnaces with slaughtered stars, swelling thus with slow eternal growth. Such is A'Rak—he is, that he might be more, time without end!"

"Thank you," smiled Paanja coldly, "for this instruction. As it happens, we know far more of A'Rak than do you, though we have not come to share our knowledge. We have come with the simpler aim of extorting from you five thousand-weight in specie."

Old Major bridled. "Do you think me a puling babe? Do you think to brandish the spidergod at me like a bugabear, and make me puke forth *money*? The A'Rak's greed will, after all, never warp his wits! Think you he would lightly kill the old guard of established wealth? We are his bulwark, disbursers of his gold through those commercial channels that bind the populace at large in thrall! However he may indulge his gluttony, he will never devour his herdsmen with his flock!"

"It is not greed impels the god, old man, but mortal peril." Here Paanja drew his blade, and touched its tip so brusquely to old Major's throat that blood flowed and the old swine squealed with pain. "I will condescend," said Paanja, "to use one further word of argument with you, oh most reverend and respected bag of pus and pestilence—which failing, I will slash your gullet to the spine, and rob your gilded sty of what we want. This sole information will I grant you first: One day hence, the god will disburse among the citizens a donative exceeding a hundred million gold lictors—in reparation for this Choosing, as he represents it. I leave the likely import of this gesture to your own cynical surmise. . . . Now. Are we to have the gold we come for?"

Now there was a different light in old Major's eye. He sat stunned a moment, inwardly surveying a very different reality from that he had been used to contemplate. But he was nothing if not a tough old realist, and a quick adapter. "Yes. Ply yon bell-pull for my clerk—you'll have it, and be damned by it, I hope. And for myself, it is time, I see, to repair to my island villa."

"If so, make haste, for we are by this dawn to interdict the casting off of any vessel from the quayside."

And so they parted, the two friends carrying four weighty satchels of gold specie whose weight even their muscled fitness found a strain to bear.

There was much further business in that epochal night's last hours, conferences with harbormasters and other municipal functionaries. In his sunrise audience at the A'Rak Fane altar, the Ecclesiarch was able to report to the god his closure of all naval traffic from the quayside. He then smoothly requested, and obtained, a sole exemption for his fellow prelate, Fursten Minim, whom he asked permission to dispatch downcoast, where further mercenaries for the god's defense could be engaged from encampments established to supply the armies engaged in the Shamnean wars. Thus did Minim sail with the god's blessing, but on an errand of his and Pandagon's own.

Minim took ship in a fleet war-galley with full cohorts of cutlass and ballista men to render it formidable, for he knew already that the seas just offshore of Hagia were even then beginning to swarm with piratical vessels lying at anchor. I myself was not unaware that by the very day of my arrival here, and in the days since, a number of hungry predators had begun assembling offcoast, and lying-to with an ear cocked shorewards. When one catches a rumor, one always thinks he has just caught the first whisper of it, while in fact, at that very moment, half the world is hearing it as well. I even had slight acquaintance, my dear Shag, with certain of these nautical ruffians (which I blush of course to confess), and thus it happened that I eventually learned something of old Fursten Major's doings that same night after his son and Pandagon had left with his gold.**

The old libertine, it seems, upon his son's departure, at once set his household hopping, gathering his portable goods into several bulky wains, and hastening, two hours before dawn and just ahead of the harbour's closure, down to his yacht at the quayside. That a hundred million-lictor donative was interpretable as sweetened fodder set for a flock to hold them for the slaughter, had not been lost on the old reprobate.

By sunrise, the Hagian coastline was falling astern of him, as he lounged, lavishly cushioned and couched, high in the poop of his yacht, bound for his villa on an islet a few hours off the coast of Hagia.

He made landfall without incident, and had himself and his holdings borne up the long flights of stone steps to his residence. But when his grunting bearers had lofted his litter to the villa's wide veranda, their first act was to drop him like a stone and take to their heels, though their flight was swiftly prevented, for the veranda was crowded with lounging brigands resting from their morning's sup of aquavit.

They were in fact Dond cannibals from the Glacial Maelstroms. Their chief, a certain Shalagastra (the one I had occasion to converse with since—a cheery, voluble fellow even though he was bleeding to death as he spoke) had a brief chat with Old Major before he and his crew roasted him alive and ate him.

Shalagastra brought the old libertine to the balustrade, and bade him scan the open sea with close attention.

"You see, you'd have fared no better had you struck for open ocean," he consoled Old Major. "See those carracks there just south of east? Gulag freebooters. And more easterly yet? Those specks? A flotilla of Lamian privateers. Others ride anchored just out of view. Word's gone wide, you see. Your spidergod's in peril . . . or so we hope. Your Monastia are rumored soon to become pregnable, and interest among my fellow entrepreneurs is—understandably—intense.

"Well, well, look here! It seems your bed of coals is bright and ready! Come come! Cease this unsightly blubbering, these shameful whinings! A manly resignation's best! Some help here, lads, he's a hefty one for sure! We must see he's well roasted, for plainly he's sickish meat!"

* * *

**[[Editor's Note:

Here, I believe, is a passage of Nifft's narrative which requires expansion rather than deletion. My friend has made only a very oblique reference to a matter he was confident that I would understand. Nifft, while travelling down to Hagia to sell his rumor, took timely advantage of the voyage to disseminate it among his guildfellows and the practitioners of various related professions. Always a keen strategist, Nifft saw that if the rumors proved true, he stood likeliest to made great gains if the civic forces of the nation were heavily engaged by a massive assault on their vaults.

—Shag Margold]]

LAGADEME VII

We gained the Ribbonrill Valley's eastern ridgeline as the swollen moon reached zenith. We were bone-tired, the way only terror and battle can make you. I chose a high curve of highway that had a bit of shoulder beside it to give shelter from the night wind to the 'shaw and my men sleeping round it. I put Mav and Nifft on first watch with me, all three of us faced outward from the sleepers and each other, I up on the shoulder, Mav and Nifft faced up and down the highway.

I leaned on the butt of my spear, feeling light and pithless as a dead vine. For our whole climb up the valley's flank—all at a dead run, in truth—my rage at this thief we had hired burned in me, fuelled me in fact with the strength to run. But so tired was I now that my anger had little heat in it—it seemed an almost theoretical anger. I felt a certain slack acceptance of the fact that a thief had wormed himself into my mission; how could this surprise me, when the mission itself was a witch's game and I its bonded dupe? Plainly, I was fate's fool. Was I not neck-deep in spider country on some trickster-hag's blind gambit? That I'd hire a thief to run point here, where the gods *hunt* thieves, merely stood to reason!

After an hour or so of silence I said, "Ephesionite."—I spoke softly, for our ears kept watch as much as our eyes—"Ephesionite, we have met the gods now. Surely, against such creatures as these, all humankind are fundamentally allied. Surely, every moment we stand on this soil, we share a risk that makes us one. Tell us what it was you knew of the a'rak that you sold to the churchman."

Without preamble, then, Nifft recited a poem, an almost impenetrably enigmatic threat directed at the A'Rak, containing one cryptic reference to an exterminating entity named *Pam'Pel*. "I encountered this lyric," he said when he had done, "on a pennysheet I found in a Kolodrian market. And I encountered elsewhere in the Shallows repeated rumors of some catastrophic civic overthrow in Hagia, specifically of `unguarded vaults.' . . ."

"Unguarded vaults. . . ." murmured Mav. "Yes. . . ."

Down on the floor of the valley we'd just crossed, there were indications that folk were—inexplicably, at first—much on the move this Shortest Night. Around at least three of the villages we could make out, there was a movement of tiny, wavery lights that had to be torches. These lights didn't have a processional, or even organized appearance, but had a fitful, frenetic movement, suggesting folk roused from sleep to a panic. Then, in the largest of these little firefly storms, the torches, with a jerky rhythm, all began to go out.

"List! Oh, hark to the poor souls!" hissed Mav, and I heard rather than saw her tears. And sure enough, up from the Valley's great bowl of moonlight, rose the frail, scattered echoes of agonal cries.

"They kept to their houses like good citizens, you see," she said after a time, "but tonight it wasn't enough. I have never heard speak of such a savage-fierce feeding like this one. It strikes me the odious bug might *be* in a terror, mayhap is gorging in panic for power. . . ."

The other two little turmoils of torches were soon extinguished. Somewhat later, a straggling line of torches could be seen—far, far a-down the highway we had just done climbing. How terrible their haste must have been, to be advancing as they were, and yet how pitifully, hopelessly slow did their flight appear so far below! And presently, the line halted and recoiled, and broke into a scatter of light-specks like errant stars, only to be snuffed out one by one in the environing darkness.

Near moonset Olombo and our pullers took watch and we curled down for some sleep of our own. I woke to the iron-gray sky of full dawn.

Grainy-eyed and shivering in the dawn chill, we squatted round trail biscuit and watered wine. When the sun's rim kindled on the eastern hills, and the first wash of light turned the blown grass golden, Shinn and Bantril took up the poles, our spearmen stepped out to point position—and Mav said, "Hold! Look where someone comes after us, round that last switchback downslope there!"

And indeed there came a smallish figure, marching with a kind of stolid energy up the grade. We mutely watched, marvelling at one who should come marching so matter-of-factly up from that valley that had been so lately aboil with death. And almost in that same instant of marvel, I knew who this was.

Now that I was rested and fed a bit, I once more found heat for anger—heat aplenty. The sun rose two spans from the skyline before she was up on the ridge and trudging directly for us, rising to and sinking from our view with the dips of the highway between. Unveiled she was now, though toweringly coiffed, her hair an angular turret of pinned and tied and braided tresses, this hair of yellowish tint shot with black. Unchanged, though, was that plump, implacable energy of her walk. Snugged in a slovenly belted tunic, her plumpness was revealed indeed to be as much muscle as fat. It was that walk of hers that enraged me most, that same relentless march with which she had led us up hill and down dale to the dairy farm, and back again. By the time she stood fronting me, I was so full of wrathful indictment I stood perfectly speechless. Her skin was a startling and offputting pale lemon-yellow in tint, and her eyes were an unpleasant yellowish orange. She held up a plump, peremptory palm, needlessly silencing the invective that I found myself tongueless to utter.

"Spare me your trite remonstrations!" she cawed. "You were duped and jackassed to a worthy end—for a nobler work than you had wit to guess at, my nuncials! And you were faithfully paid! Hold your tongues please and learn the lie of it, because by all the nasty crooklegged gods, we're full of urgent business this morning! First! *I* am not Pompilla. *She* is!"

And she pointed at our cracked and cord-bound coffin. All our mouths sagged open at once, I believe, and she cut us all off at once: "Silence! Each thing in its measure, and order. I am Jaundyssa the Fat, a Stregan walking-witch by birth, a disadvantaged orphan. I will not long *remain* Jaundyssa the Fat, because I am now embarked—and all of you are embarked with me of course—upon my *Opus Eponymous*! Yes! Even to that high plateau of scholarship in Lore am I risen! And when we are done, I will be newly named with a name of glory, a name of *my* fashioning, *my* earning: I will be

called Jaundyssa the A'Raknicide! Or it may be, Jaundyssa the Hammer of Spiders, or perhaps—I am weighing them all—Jaundyssa the A'Rak's Bane!"

"Do you tell us," I gasped, "that you have enlisted us in the *killing* of . . . ?"

"Yes!" There was a mad fire in her tawny-gold eyes. "We have come to slay and gut great Grandfather A'Rak himself! Yes! Even such is the glory I have contrived to employ you in! And are you ignorant of the strictures placed by the Sisterhood upon all candidates for an Opus Eponymous? The severely restricted budget of thaumaturgy allotted us? Do you wonder at my contrivances and improvisations, the humiliating indirections and homely stratagems I have been driven to? How dare you scowl? Why are you all not mad with pride and gratitude!? At the very least, be *silent* till I have instructed ye!"

In truth, none of us *could* have spoken just then. On she ranted. "I will tell you that the path I've come to be standing here now was a bone-grinding hard one to walk, and I flinched not from one of its rigors! In accomplishing the Opus, one's limits are cruelly austere, as all the world knows. The barest modicum of sorcery's permitted—all else must be contrivance, ingenuity and artifice. I have never faltered in sacrifice. For the cash to engage yourselves, I sold my beauty—though even in this did I deal so cannily that I forced the old shylock to leave me my lovely complexion!" (I could not tell if this was jest, though she seemed, like many fanatics, devoid of any humor other than a kind of rabid glee.) "All my plan's thousand details," she raved, "the subtle shifts of my inexhaustible wit! Each delicate feint, each subtle confusion sown abroad in the adversary's mind, each perfect, dear-bought link in this chain is of my own forging and every link thus far has vindicated my conception!

"How it *galls* me, then, that my Docenta in the exploit, Strega Eel Writher —I say this of course with all respect for her august academic standing—is an ophidian bitch bent on nitpicking and precedent-poking and deviling me a dozenfold ways every inch of my progress! Why is genius always under the thumb of peevish mediocrity!? I'm shut of her now at the last, though—

for the real pith of it all, the jump into the jaws of it, I'm free of her! Henceforth, things will move lively indeed, my friends!"

Her furious rodomontade had cast a mild spell, and her sudden silence now rather jolted us. It was Mav who answered her, after a pause, seeming rather to muse than to seek a reply. "Unless I mistake me, Jaundyssa, Endon Thioz, where the cargo's bound, sounds a bit like High Archaic, which, if so, could be rendered: *inside the god*. . . ."

"You noticed that, did you?" smiled orange-eyed Jaundyssa the Fat. I decided that she was far more unpleasant when she was being quiet and sly than when she was ranting. But Mav had the air of thinking about something else entirely.

"Do you hear that?" she softly asked, ". . . and there, again?"

"Yes. A cottage door banging in the wind."

"Just so. And there . . . and again—a lambkin bleating for teat. . . . There's Smattering Hamlet just downridge there. But the flocks should all be a-pasture with the sun this high."

"Smattering Hamlet's indeed just ahead," crooned the witch cryptically, with less glee in her eyes, though no less strange fire. The note of fear in Mav's words woke me up. "Honest Jaundyssa," I said, not struggling to hide my irony, "are we to advance? Mav is not bound to you, but I and my crew, counting her a friend, would help her in seeing what's amiss ahead."

"On with it!" cried the witch, "our paths are the same!"

We had advanced for some few moments before I was able to hear what Mav and the witch had caught: a faint, clapping percussion conveyed on the morning breeze; a creaking, a flat smack of woody impact.

"Is an unlatched door in the wind so sinister hereabouts?" I gently asked Mav. I already guessed the reason for her growing abstraction: she was thinking of her own highland hamlet, of her two little girls.

"We're tight and tidy in the highlands," she said vaguely. She was listening hard as we advanced, and fighting down fear. I shared her unease. Though these highlanders lived plain and austere enough, I'd seen nothing slattern or slipshod about them. A banging-loose door hereabouts did feel sinister. Then the highway wrapped round a last fold in the hillside, and dove toward the vale below and there, in a nook between two hilltops, was the village of Smattering Hamlet.

A healthy-sized hamlet in its grassy cove, above a score of cots and crofts, thatch-roofed, and along its outskirts, bulky three-walled barns of bleached plank, and shearing-pens with neat little fieldstone walls. The cleanly flagged lanes that webbed the dwellings were empty. The sun, middling high now, strewed the hills with rich light, and the place was half golden and half shadow. "You see how the stone walls are kicked through here and there?" Alarm was swiftly awakening in Mav's voice now. Once shown I distinctly saw what she meant: the little fieldstone walls of lots and pens—they'd been randomly kicked through here and there, the little spills of strewed stones all scattered towards the hamlet.

Just then our three surviving yapps reappeared, who since sunup had been out again scouting our van. Mav, reading them at a glance, did not pause for their message, but bolted ahead—what a sprint she had! She passed Olombo and Nifft before they even heard her coming, so they both jumped, then ran to catch up. We all ran to catch up except for Jaundyssa the Fat, who, still in her brief fit of taciturnity, did not hasten with us but nodded us darkly on.

There to the left was the house with the banging door, among the first outliers. It was the front door that was banging, which seemed the more ominous. Across the highway from this house was the open-walled hay-barn next to a pen of full-uddered gleets. In the hay-barn's shelter, corded bales of hay were stacked neat, like a wall of blocks, except for a collapse of this straw wall at the end nearest the highway; here bales were tumbled like bricks a mason's spilled from his hod.

"Holla!" Mav was crying, "who's home in Smattering!? Ho ye townsfolk, we are travellers seeking ye!"

Olombo pointed. "See there—isn't that someone they've toppled on? Under that bale there, that arm there . . . *is* it an arm . . . ?"

It did seem to be a childsize arm, dark-skinned, hooked over one of the bales. We hastened near. Not dark skinned—but a blackly shrivelled arm and hand it proved. The bones in it were of adult length, but this might have been some millennial mummy's arm, the skin like leather shrunk tight to the bone as if centuries of desert sun had tanned it. Olombo reached forth his spearpoint and levered a fallen bale off the top of the arm's owner.

The man half buried amid the bales proved all of a match for his arm. He was a black horror, shrunk skinny as a monkey, wearing a night-dress now far too big for him, with two big holes punched through the back of it. You could count his teeth through his hard-shrunk cheeks; his sockets held little dabs of black snot, the residue only of eyes, but we could all picture plainly in our own minds' eyes the last vision those luckless eyes had seen.

Oh that little hamlet of tormented sleepers! It will live in the saddest region of my heart until my life is done! Their poor diminished bodies, vilely vandalized, most of them still in their beds, taken in the deep of night! Long was our searching out of them, house by house, and long was our assembling of that black, contorted host upon the straw bed of its funeral pyre!

At her first glimpse of what had passed here, Mav would have been away like a shot, back to her own Haggis with not one more word for us, but Jaundyssa obstructed her and proclaimed: "Haggis is unscathed!"

"You are a lying witch!" In her furious pale eyes I saw Mav was near fighting pitch.

"Thou ninny, plainly I'm a witch, I lie with gusto, yet Haggis is unscathed and your girlies safe, and both town and tykes will stay so! I believe you have boasted your wish to slay A'Rakspawn. Perhaps I should ask you,

before putting the sword of this divine crusade in your hand, just how much spiderblood have you the gullet to spill, and if indeed you meant what you boasted?"

Put in the form of that question, the witch's persuasion worked on all of us most effectively. We had been criminally defrauded by her, for she had only incidentally contracted us as deliverers of her consignment, while intending to use us as *soldiers* all along, a cold-blooded violation of Nuncial diplomatic neutrality, one of my guild's bedrock tenets. But in our hearts, now we had met and understood the gods of this place, we none of us wanted our neutrality in the least, and positively craved to butcher these brutes, one and all.

So we gathered and burned the dead of Smattering Hamlet, and as we worked, Mav's tears streamed down, but not a sound escaped her. Seventy-three souls had been plundered, man, woman and child, and with torches we sent after these souls the pitiful, pithless, twisted tenements of flesh that had housed them. They burnt like cured wood, converted almost wholly into black smoke that climbed the wind into the wide noon sky.

We searched each other's faces across the hot, crumbling coals. "Some of these houses' doors," Olombo mused, "had ruptured frames, and the walls broken round them, while others were burst by smaller intruders."

"A hunting-pack of big and small together. They were pack-hunting down in the valley last night as well," said Mav, looking at the witch. "I have never heard of the like of this."

"The A'Rak is busy in his own defense," the witch said. "What say I wager you something, hill-girlie? I wager you that without going far we could lay the sword of vengeance on the very pack of bugs that did this slaughter here?"

"Encounter them and kill them, you say?" I could not help but ask.

"If they prove killable, Nuncio, yes. Do you not realize, none of you, what a great feeding on human flesh has transpired this night just past? Had you no

sense of it in the air, at the least?"

"Say where to find them," I cried, "and let us be after them!"

"Call back your dogfolk then," smiled Jaundyssa unpleasantly.

Mav gave her earsplitting two-fingered whistle. The three yapp survivors of last night came loping into view impossibly fast. We realized they were already pell-melling back with a report before Mav had summoned them.

"*Spider-find, spider-find, spider-find!"*

Mav wheeled them round and sprinted off with them downslope through the broken walls of fields and pens, and into the high grass. We followed slower, with the 'shaw to manage, till the witch told us to leave it to her, and then we went quicker, I with my steel pulled, the trusty old blade's heft limbering the muscles in my forearm, and in my heart a kind of rising song of eagerness, thinking of spidergut strewn copiously across the tawny grass . . .

We caught up to Mav where a steep meadow opened out, and we plunged into the waist-high grass. We fanned out and, at a stealthy crouch, followed the yapps into the thicket.

Oh, freezing thrill of terror and bloodlust blended! In a clearing within the thicket we confronted a whole group of A'Rakspawn, all of them sleeping, seemingly, all lying low and still, so that to see them was in the same instant to charge, to seize the lucky moment. . . .

Until we all were brought up short, coming to various staggering comical halts, as we comprehended just what it was that confronted us in the sun-washed glade.

Some of these spawn were huge, with legspans broad as cottage roofs—but all of them were shrunken, crooked *husks* of A'Raks, with flat, deflated abdomens and twisted, bunched legs. Every one was as dead and drained as their prey up in Smattering Hamlet. The sun glinted on their hellish eye-

globes, their extruded fangs, their nightmare faces all emptied of the power to harm.

Jaundyssa strolled out of the trees with the 'shaw softly creaking behind her. "Now you'll note by the size of these," said the witch in a smug, insufferably droll tone, "that, as you might put it hill-girlie, a mickle big one of their older brothers found them. And you can be sure, all of you, that yet bigger will come for those big brothers, and so on, and so on. On the face of it, I was homicidal, putting you in the field during this feeding frenzy which —I promise you—is still in progress. Indeed, that slithering bitch my Docenta carped as much! But it was inspired! What else could as effectively distract them from detecting Pompilla, once her 'shaw wheels were off the water and rolling on Hagian soil? What else but their own blind gluttony itself, their fever for the hunt, be cover enough for your progress inland?! Especially at the pitch the feeding would rise to, once A'Rak sensed her coming, as he could not but do?! I read it brilliantly, used my own partial detection as my cover!

"But I tell you all to be warned now, for what follows from this point on must be done on the run, flat out. Draw breath now, for we now plunge to the killing work itself, and there'll be no safe rest for us till it's accomplished!"

Nifft spoke up here. "Before we do take such a . . . harrowing and headlong plunge, I for one would like to ask a question or two. You have called your Docenta Ell Writher. Is she related to—"

"She is Eelritter of course, your balladeering Dame! She helped me acquire your services. You above all, thief, should be joyous at my having dragooned you! Look to what an opportunity you are brought, if we bring it off! Look what an opening my ingenuity will make for your greed!"

Nifft replied, stiffly, "A number of perfectly noble motives actuated my voyage here, my Good Witch, though of course I must decline the indignity of enumerating them."

"Of course!"

"Another question concerns me. Ah, *she* there, on the 'shaw. . . . Is it she who is going to kill the A'Rak?"

"Absolutely! What else have I been *telling* you all morning long now?"

"Do you tell us also," Mav asked, "that she will kill him after we put her *inside* him?"

"Thank dark powers that it's not that hard. She need only be lodged inside *a* god, not *the* god, to be resurrected. Mind you it *will* be a sizeable god that we'll need for the job. One about as big as the one that devoured all these, in fact. One that big is likely to be the resident monster of an established fane, so we'll indeed be going to a fane—this instant in fact, we head for the nearest one handy that offers the right terrain."

"And in this sizeable resident A'Rak of this fane," I asked, wanting, like the Ephesionite, to be perfectly clear, "*inside* this A'Rakspawn we are to lodge Pompilla here?"

"Right as rain! Tuck, plant, insert, entomb, inter within! And soon after doing so, we will be armed to rise up and make war on the spidergod and all his crooklegged, man-killing spawn, and exterminate the brutes!"

It was only when we were once again sprinting down the highway that I noticed that at some point during our work in Smattering Hamlet, the witch had gathered and lashed to the 'shaw's undercarriage some few provisions from the slaughtered town: coils of extra line, some martels and a keg of spikes, half a dozen axes, some hunting bows and extra spears. . . .

NIFFT VI

(. . .)

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Before turning, then, to what the witch had in store for us on that same day, I have to say candidly that I found my position most vexing, once I had grasped what it was. I had come to Hagia a newsbringer of cataclysm who meant to get right to work on harvesting the fortune that might arise from that same cataclysm. That I should so summarily find myself, as the witch rightly put it, *dragooned*, into the actual perpetrating of the cataclysm (if I may phrase it so) galled me in a twofold way: it tortured me with impatience to begin the practice of my art, and it filled me with mortal terror for my life, our foes in the endeavor being what they were.

Jaundyssa the Fat, though as arrogant as most walking witches I've met, was not too proud a commander to discuss her strategies with the troops—in fact the problem was to prevent her from gloating over them at tedious length. But we were reassured when Mav pronounced the witch's thinking to be sound. A spawn sized to slay and devour a half score such monsters as these in the thicket would indeed likely be a fane-spider, resident in a cavern beneath the local church, and probably the nearest temple since, as Mav put it, "The mighty ones stick to their parishes. They're shy to irk their equals in size. But have you also considered"—this to the witch—"that their great Daddy is likely out in his deep tunnels even now, surprising and devouring these same mightiest ones? For that's his quick way to collect the takings of scores of lesser spawn, all at a stroke."

"In this," snapped Jaundyssa, "we're at the luck of the draw, hill-girlie. Exploits that aren't half hazard are none of them *great* exploits. So! You'll confirm that the nearest-lying fane is Haggardscroft Fane?"

"I will," Mav answered.

"Then just confirm me a few things further, dear girlie—the Haggardscroft River, I'm told, is a goodly flux that runs a fathom or two deep most places? And this is because the Haggardscroft Lake up in the northern valley is a sizeable lake, and feeds into the river by a creek that is also a substantial run of water?"

"All that is so, witch."

"And maybe, to clinch it, you know this as well; the Haggardscroft Fane stands moderately near the riverside woods?"

"It stands some score of rods from the woods I think, yes. . . ."

"Splendid, not that I really doubted my researches. Nuncio, you'll find your map already shows you our route. The Haggardscroft's the next valley north, and if we run for fair, we can reach the woods below the Fane with two hours of daylight to spare."

We did indeed "run for fair." We ran the sun up to the zenith and, never pausing, ran it down again. When we plunged into the Haggardscroft Valley, we found it marvellously empty of folk. I believe between the ridgeline and the river we saw but one small, lonely figure scything early hay in a far field; I thought he or she had a dazed air, seeming to work with a kind of stunned sloth—perhaps his mind had snapped with what had passed the night before. . . .

Then, late in the day at Upper Bridge—the village straddling the Haggardscroft—we saw as we trotted across the span a handful of folk down on the little docksides, where but three or four gondolas were moored to unload their wool and cheese. With these people, seen thus close, there was no mistaking the signs of stunned horror. Their tottery gait spoke of friends and kin devoured in the night. Dame Lagademe has reported the outrage which the sight of Hagia's spider-haunted villages kindled in her, so closely environed as they were by the invisible tyranny of fear. I felt that same anger, beholding Upper Bridge. Endangered and inconvenienced though I was by my drafting for this enterprise, I cannot pretend that I did not feel a certain relish for it at the same time.

Just across the river, the highway turned north to parallel it. The riverside woods ran unbroken on our left, while on our right, forest intermittently yielded to grassy slopes.

The sun might have been still as much as two hours high, but it wasn't one whit more, when at last we beheld, up in one of these grassy swards, the surprisingly impressive Haggardscroft Fane. It was an octagonal vault of massive and polished black ashlar, and its dimensions were quite grand for an up-country church. It looked most foreboding, in fact, and I was keen to reconnoiter it well and master its layout and surroundings while there was good light for it.

This was not to be. We were all set at once to work in the riverside woods downslope from the fane.

"We must cut a laneway from highway to river-bank, you see," the witch told us, "and make a raft of the trees you cut down to do it. Start at the river bank and cut towards the highway, and your work will be shielded thus from the highway till dark has fallen, by which time you *must* be done."

So impossible seemed that task within that time-span, that we plunged to work without protest. For her part, the witch vanished up the sward to do her own reconnaissance.

Our work was nasty and gruelling at the start. We hacked away undergrowth with our swords to clear enough free footing for the toil of the tree-felling. But once we'd felled and trimmed a score of trees, and laced them together with ropes and vine, our workspace and our pace increased, and our axebits began biting steadily through a swathe of trees.

The witch returned as sunset neared, and pulled Bantril and Shinn off axe work to help her—over a low fire—cook the trim-wood for the thick yellow resins it was full of. She laced together a sizeable basketwork frame of boughs, and began to coat this frame with the collected pitch. A huge tarry mass of sap quickly accreted on the frame.

As the sun set and the light started failing, we with the axes became veritable engines of labor. Implacably we hewed, our bits chewed through the trunks, and the trees collapsed with whispery concussions . . . until—quite suddenly, as it seemed—here were stars coming out above us, here were the last trees fallen, here we stood at the highway, and a treeless corridor behind us ran all the way from the highway to the riverbank.

The witch and the pullers had finished the raft. A massy platform it was of two-score big trunks bound and cross-braced, and mounted on its riverward end was the big pitch-covered frame. The witch assembled us round the raft, just as moonrise kindled in the east.

"Well done, my doughty troops, well done! Ye work like demons, and in truth, I chose ye all for your mettle! But one task remains before the sweet moment of drawing blood. We must convey yon raft up to the very porch of the A'Rak Fane."

Her honey-tongued praise, so uncharacteristic, seemed now explained: We six were to convey a forty-trunk raft over all the treestumps that still obstructed the corridor we'd cut, and then three hundred strides up a goodly slope of meadow-grass! It was plainly impossible, far beyond our strength, with or without flattery.

As one, we vigorously protested, but were calmed, for, in the event, the conveyance of the raft to the temple door was implemented by some of the witch's tightly-budgeted thaumaturgy (for as all the world knows, an Opus Eponymous is only earned under the most draconian austerity of sorcerous means). But before moving the raft, the witch took me up to the temple, to rehearse me for my role as bait to our quarry.

Or better I should say, took me as close as we dared go to the temple—"For at near enough range your mere thievish odor will call him out prematurely," the witch assured me. Still, under the deepening night we drew quite near enough to the fane's great, doorless portal. It held a square mouthful of the torchlit gloom within, and I promise you it inspired me—if

not with piety for the cult—at least with sufficient awe for the horrors that ruled it.

Here we crouched, while the witch detailed to me an alarming scenario according to which I was to bring the monster into our trap. I won't say she didn't show impressive imagination. In fact, it was her plan in the main which I agreed to, though not before modifying some of the details of execution she had blithely specified, pointing out to her that while I was indeed a remarkably nimble fellow, some of her instructions presumed an impossible agility, and to follow them must be the death of me.

She was as much disposed to hear criticism of her wishes as any witch is, which is to say, not at all, but by threat of doing nothing at all for her if denied, she accepted my alterations.

Back down to the raft we went, the infallibly abrasive Jaundyssa muttering peevishly the while. Round our raft, in our odd little notch through the trees, we stood under a sky thickly paved with stars, where the moon-blaze had not quite yet begun to fan out. We stood looking up towards the fane in silence. Not even Jaundyssa's fanatic zeal could fail to see that our silence in this moment expressed our shared awe and dread of what we were about to undertake.

"As blatant as these doings of ours here seem," said the witch, trying out an unaccustomed soothing tone, "we *will* have the advantage of surprise, my troops! There is a lethargy after feasting which even now must weigh the monster down. Then too, mighty spawn like these, in *times* like these—if they are alert for anything, it is the stealthy tread of their Sire, who perhaps is coming even now to gather what they have reaped from their lesser brothers. In short, the spawn won't feel us near till our good Ephesionite strides into his temple, and he senses the weight of a thievish tread crossing his stony roof. Drawn out, startled and dazed, at that moment, the monster will fall, fall helpless into our hands, I promise you!

"And now, as I have also promised you, we will enjoy what my tight-fistedness with thaumaturgy has purchased us: a mighty vehicle, and a kind

of invisibility as well. Mount up on the raft with our precious Pompilla there!"

She stepped out on the riverbank, scowling down upon the black sinewy water twisting past. Raising her hands, she began to make the movements of one who pinches thread between left thumb and forefinger, and draws it out with right thumb and forefinger. And though her hands began empty, it was suddenly thread in fact she was pulling—a bright yellow thread, which softly blazed in the starlight. From her empty left hand she pulled out this bright yellow thread, while it dangled longer and longer, piling in a bright heap at her feet. At length, appearing to judge that she had length enough, she tossed her end of the thread out over the water.

The thread leapt out and hung floating on the air; it curved back to join its tail, and formed a rippling oval above the muttering river. Suddenly the oval dropped, and laid a hissing circle on the water, a circle of yellow steam undisturbed by the river's flowing through it. The river flowed, but the hot circle smoked there unmoved. Then Jaundyssa the Fat made a gesture which lifted a thick, shuddering oval of water up out of the river.

"A nice, thick piece of slave-water," she muttered, "should make it go smooth enough. . . ." The newly minted coin of water, its melting sides textured like hammered pewter, came edging tonguelike onto the bank, and slid itself foaming under the raft. "Secure the 'shaw and stand steady!" cried the witch.

Up we were hoisted, smoothly swept through the corridor we'd cut, and on up the slope of starlit grass. Our progress was almost mute; the water, cohering like a possessive palm, cupped us along with a kind of low, wet breathing noise, no more.

I will say that, buoyed by this deft, massy chunk of magic, I began to feel a little better about my own personal role here—began to feel, you might say, that our resources might carry enough clout to match our quarry's hideous, inhuman strengths.

The raft floated to the temple's very threshold. The witch gestured, and the water flowed away and sank hidden into the grass.

The Nuncial crew and Mav dispersed neatly, taking up concealments that flanked the portal. They had bows and fire arrows and spears, none in themselves potent enough to harm the giant we expected here, though the spears were all now anointed with a powerful paralytic that would greatly magnify their impact. The witch, trundling away the 'shaw, crouched into her covert last, and gestured me impatiently to my work.

The stage was mine, so to speak. My role even involved some stage properties and costumery, which I disposed first. From gray gleetswool blankets we had improvised two identical roomy cloaks with hoods. One of these I draped as convincingly as possible over the mass of pitch on its frame. The second one, with a flourish, I donned.

Thus arrayed, no further preparations offered me pretext for delay. So I advanced—gingerly, I do concede—through the looming portal of the Haggardscroft A'Rak-Fane.

Beneath that gloomy and severely architected vault, at each of its eight angles, cressets blazed, and dropped a flickery, mothlike light upon the dark stone rim of the yawning altar-pit. It was not the chasm of Big Quay, but it was nonetheless a hole sized to admit a mighty bulk. It lay some forty strides within the temple, wherein I advanced but ten. The interior was pew-less—one worshipped standing, it seemed, out in the country. The significance of this circumstance to me was that the space between me and the pit was bare of any obstruction that might slow down whatever emerged.

Though bare of seating, the sprawling interior was—just like the metropolitan fane—transparently partitioned by gauzy white hangings. I found these hangings most unnerving. They had a way of *breathing*, stirring sluggishly to the most delicate crosscurrents of the air, and of course it seemed to me that the pit's breath stirred them.

After a few moments, it felt faintly ludicrous simply to be standing there awaiting notice, but I found it mortifyingly difficult to perpetrate any movement or utterance that would more blatantly announce my intrusion. My every instinct, and least muscle, strenuously concurred in my perfect stasis: immobility seemed the only conceivable behaviour in this monstrous place.

With enormous effort, however, I made myself pace a few steps leftward, then rightward—taking care to get no nearer to the altar-pit in doing so. I scuffled my feet on the flagging with each step, and the dry abrasions of my bootsoles seemed loud as thunder.

Nothing answered. Sluggishly, menacingly, the hangings breathed in the silence. Obviously, I must resort to yet more foolhardy demonstrations. As I stood hesitating, a vague coolth that smelt of the tomb flirted with my nostrils. I comprehended that it was the breath of the spidery under-world, a rumor of all the dark, dank vastness of their tunnel labyrinth wormholing all Hagia's foundations. . . . But still, that eerie exhalation from the pit reported no murmur of movement below.

Not only my own survival, but our plan's success as well, required that I emerge from the fane before the god was upon me. Though the witch had planned otherwise, it seemed clear to me now that to penetrate further was tactically imprudent. I decided that if the impiety of my thievish feet's contact with these holy stones did not suffice to bait our beast, I must try a still more violent impiety, rather than a closer approach.

"Why, what lovely silk hangings!" I exclaimed. How huge my voice seemed! "I simply *must* slice me a swathe of it for a cloak or two!" I bellowed. And plucking my blade from my back I suited action to word, and slashed a great winding-sheet of silk off the hem of the nearest dangler. Immediately I whirled and slashed off another—more to keep myself in motion than for anything else, for I greatly dreaded being even briefly paralyzed with fear when the moment came.

Even as I stooped to sweep up my pair of diaphanous trophies, I felt with sickish clarity an oily-scratchy scrambling deep in the stony sinus of the pit. My brain improvising madly, I swept my slashed silk round my shoulders, cloaking my cloak with it, even as I sprang nimbly backwards, to plant myself just within the portal of the Fane.

Now the silk hangings bulged quite unmistakably with an outwelling of air from the pit, whence then erupted legs like nightmare cacti, all bristles and barbs. These paused in crooked arches for an instant, and then the pit disgorged the furry horror. The sticky whisper of the titan's thought feathered up and down my spine:

Thief! Desist! Thy meat and thy ghost are forfeited to me for this thine impious intrusion!

I had, without daring to plan for it, hoped for this moment of formal accusation. The spider spawn—taking our first for typical—showed a ceremonious streak. They *believed* themselves gods, perhaps. I will concede, too, that there was indeed awe enough radiating from this one. It was twice the size of a crofter's cottage, its fangs thrice as long as a scythe. The delicate claws of its feet plucked a dry, chittery music from the stone floor as it fidgeted, gathering to spring.

"A thousand pardons, O thou noble sprig of Greatness!" I cried suavely. They heard one out if one replied, I'd found. "I'm quite in awe of you! I didn't think a god would be . . . *in*, you see! I do apologize, and I wholeheartedly renounce these spoils of your sanctum! By all means, keep your fabric!"

Your crime exceeds amendement or reparation. Your very being is a capital offense, for you are a most palpable and unmistakable thief, and no thief may live past the hour when his foot profanes my shrine.

"Forgive me, oh deity," I protested, "but this appears both captious and intransigent of you. Please allow me to point out—"

My words were a mere feint, covering my leaping exit. It was a supple, sudden, and prodigious saltation. A second mighty leap put me halfway across the raft, and a third landed me behind our pitch-frame, round which I wound the silk in one enveloping sweep, and above which I positioned my head, just as the mighty a'rakspawn boiled in a furor of legs from the Fane's looming portal.

"But grant me leave to depart on my raft in peace!" I cried with brazen nonsensicality, "and but spare me after all, oh great one, but this one paltry swathe of your silk that I've made me this cloak from—"

But the shaggy giant was launched, of course: *Thus I possess thee, meat and ghost, foul thief*!

I had but fractions of an instant to work with, for before I leapt clear, he must be so nearly on me as to make a mid-air swerve too late. Never have I beheld hugeness so fleet—a giant near quick as a flea! It revisits my nightmares still, that endless instant, but leap clear I did, and so narrowly that I felt the heat of my colleagues' flame-arrows streaking in to ignite the pitchy frame even as the A'Rakspawn's fangs sank fast in its lethal adhesion.

I hugged earth as I tumbled away, for the whirr of flung spears also sang above me. Meaty impacts decorated the great furred bulb with new bristles. The great legs fought furiously to wrench free from their blazing prey (which we had firmly anchored to the timbers), but almost on the instant when the spears impacted, the monster's struggles grew spastic, and slowed. A few seconds more, and the nightmare lay slumped on the raft, the pitchy mass burning down to a huge ember that still encased his now fused and melted fangs, and his legs only twitching vaguely now and again.

"All aboard!" trumpeted Jaundyssa, as she set the example with the 'shaw in tow. "Unlimber the line! Lash down the legs and the bulb! I am Genius incarnate, am I not!!? Behold the brute! Ours! And the snaky bitch mocked me—behold, wrinkled viper! Hither now, slave-water! Hither—be quick!"

We were scarce well aboard when the silvermuscled water tongue slid cohering from the deep grass and licked itself under the raft, lifting us onto its smooth flux with a downhill plunge that staggered us all. But the witch would brook no staggering, nor a moment's pause:

"Lash the brute, damn ye, lash him—this is the slowest we'll run all night long—find your sea legs and secure him!"

We ringed the A'Rakspawn—and found scant clear deck to stand on round his great perimeter. Heaving coils of line criss-cross, we lashed the brute's huge bulb down, dogging the lashes with spikes to the logs.

"Here's a plunge now!" the witch shrilled—for we'd plunged through our corridor now and here was the rushing Haggardscroft, its black water sinewing past two fathoms below. We crouched and gripped the lashings we'd just strung as our watertongue surged out and hung on the air. "Down!" shrilled the witch, and we plunged and smote the river with a soft-foaming fusion.

River-borne now, we ran silent and smooth. The river was wide enough to carve a chasm of sky in the treetops, and the river of stars running over us was paling before the moon's advance.

"Lash the legs now!" barked the witch. "Look sharp, blast ye, won't ye look sharp? We're a breath, no more, from our triumph! Lash down his legs! Thou, Nuncio, and hill-girlie, thou! Help me unlash and unbox her now, and hoist our Pompilla up onto his midsection!"

Less than the pale light and the flux of the raft, what made our work somewhat dizzying was our captive's *mind*, for his unearthly thought, though now so discohered as to be meaningless, still flared and muttered in him. It licked and prickled along our spines, and provoked strange qualms deep in our nerves. It soon fell to a low mutter, like dying coals, as the paralytic took fuller hold on the monster, but this unearthly murmuring of his captive mind and shackled will was never wholly silenced.

When the witch, with Mav and Lagademe, had extracted Pompilla's pallid ellipsoid from the coffin, and carried her up onto the carapace of the monster's flat midsection, she borrowed Mav's sunder of her, and leaned over the tiered black gems of the A'Rakspawn's eyes. Jaundyssa's gloating glee made her eyes glow an unpleasant pale orange.

"How does it suit you, crook-leg? Paralysis—how do you like it? You will, yet cannot move, hear, yet cannot speak. I dance—feel me?—on your helpless sprawling meat, oh so-called deity! Likest thou this? Eh? Eh?" With each prompt she stomped with her heel. "We'll have many a pleasant chat, you and I—as you yourself have always liked to do with your prey, eh? Eh? Eh? But look you now, crook-leg. Your helpless, voiceless mentation—so impotent to cry out a coherent alarm, yet still will aimlessly report fragments of what you see, to whatever of your kin might chance to hear you. Therefore I have the melancholy duty of informing you that we must obliterate every last one of your loathsome eyes." The witch, leaning over the largest eyes, thwacked the flat of Mav's blade suggestively against her palm. "Ready now? Mmmm?"

Wreaked upon any less loathsome creature than the spawn, the relish with which the witch obliterated his eyes would have been disturbing. The spider-thought surged incoherently, and after, diminished slowly.

"For this delight, much thanks, oh crook-leg; that you'll now delight me even more is just so *uncommonly* kind of you! You know of Pompilla, of course? Pam'Pel?"

Another surge here of spiderthought uncannily suggested recognition in the monster.

"Of course you do!" agreed Jaundyssa. "Now you are to receive her! You are to be her womb! Her feast, from inside out! Yes! How likest thou that, my fine crookie-wookie?! Eh? Eh? Eh?!"

The witch was grotesquely drunk on triumph. Even so, an air of ceremony settled on her as she came to what was plainly, for her, an act of sacramental solemnity. She bade Mav and the Nuncio face each other across that

sarcophagoid shape, and lift it between then, with its more sharply tapered end presented towards the furred frontal bulge of the abdomen. The witch stepped up to the hirsute globe and lifted the sunder in a two-hand grip:

"Spawn, receive thy father's foe! Feed her that within ye grows!"

With one great, smooth downstroke, she hewed a vertical slash through the thick, furred integument. "Thrust her in, strongly now, all the way in with her!"

Mav and Lagademe jumped to it, thrust in the sarcophagoid out of sight, and drew back their hands black with spawn-blood. The witch raised the slick blade high and sang out:

"Goddess on thy right prey feed! Let it resurrection breed!"

Before our eyes, the incision crusted over and was sealed in scab.

There followed perhaps an hour of something like repose for us. We snaked silently down the forest-walled river, and we grew calm and almost accustomed to the monstrous thing rope-webbed upon our raft. Flowing along so smoothly, we began to feel this mad venture was a sure thing, that it was launched and all but unstoppable. For the water, we knew, was a mask, a muffler of our tread upon the spider-webbed earth.

Then, as the moon was just edging into our narrow roof of sky, the river slowed and broadened into a marshy tract. Dense mists here cloaked us in their wraiths, even as the moon blazed down the stronger, so that it seemed a milk-white smoke had swallowed us.

"We are near where Haggardscroft Creek comes down from the lake," murmured Mav. And just then, a feathery faint terror tickled our brainstems:

Brother where art thou? . . . feel thou'rt in pain . . . how goest thou so quickly? . . .

It was a probing spider-thought, not near, but none too distant neither. It came wavering out over the waters from somewhere ashore, groping, as it were, for our whereabouts. And as we still stood searching one anothers' eyes—each to see if he alone had heard it, a second, more distant gust of thought came a-tickling our spines—too remote to be understood, but with the same wavery, groping touch.

"There's the creek there leftwards," hissed Mav. The witch, perplexed fury in her fiery eyes, gestured, and our slavewater wrenched up half way out of its river-matrix, and foaming upstream against the creek's current, bore us upslope, filling the creek's channel bank-to-bank.

"Was this unforeseen of you, walking-witch?" Mav asked Jaundyssa. We had all climbed onto the spawn's flat midsection, huddling close to hear the murmured exchange. The creek's banks were wooded, but the screen of trees was gappy, and less dense, and under the moonlight we felt all too blatant, perched on our colossal cargo.

"The water's masking power, I've judged it to the whisker, hill-girlie, I—"

"We and Pompilla are masked, witch, but old crooklegs isn't," Mav declared. "The spawn have a predator's nose for each other, deep-dyed cannibals as they are. Our prey here's big meat, and his aura declares both his size and his wounded state. If you mean to find covert up on the lake, we'll stay hid well enough, but unless you hide him somehow—" here her heel smote the hideous floor we all stood on "—every spider for five leagues around is going to converge toward us."

NIFFT VII

So headlong were our toils, Dear Shag, to lodge Pompilla in "the fane Endon-Thioz," that it has not seemed fitting to interrupt my account of them. Thus I must backtrack now to tell what passed with Paanja Pandagon in Big Quay on that same day and night. If I could have communicated to the Ecclesiarch what the witch had in hand, and withal how near loomed war between North Hagia and her gods, he would have felt less anguish in the decision he had to make that morning.

His masterful handling had for the moment quelled the panic of the general populace. The Dockmeisters and Masters of the City Watch had, while spreading word of the harbor's general lock-down, informed all foreign mariners that they were to participate in the morrow's vast donative. Meanwhile the municipal criers had studiously disseminated among the citizenry detailed directions for the orderly enactment of said donative. The dwellers of each street and lane found posted schedules minutely specifying the routes and times for their advent to the great largesse in Keelyard Square. Such a concretely orchestrated proceeding was calmative—the prospect of the morrow's gold loomed solid and persuasive. Several wagons of gold specie, drawn from the nearest monastium, stood already on display in the square. All the forces of the City Watch and the Quayside Cadres, assisted by the church's own Bailiffs, Reeves, and mercenaries, were early aswarm down the length of the Quay, bringing captains and crews ashore to free quarters in town, and setting before them free flagons of ale and aquavit.

But, all this done, Paanja Pandagon confronted a grave tactical necessity. His only confidant, Minim, was already making way down Hagia's coast to the South Hagian port of Skallywode, where many mercenary captains staged their cohorts while a-hunting markets in the bellicose Astrygals. The Ecclesiarch, struggling without the counsel of his lifelong ally, was for a time sorely bowed beneath the gravity of what he was grappling with.

Because a short time's reflection on old Fursten Major made it plain to the Ecclesiarch that many others belonging to the ranks of the smart, cynical Old Money of Big Quay—with their armed retainers and special resources for bribery and influence—were all but certain to begin bolting in their turn. Pandagon astutely grasped that the general populace, lacking the power to reestablish themselves elsewhere in security, were poignantly eager to believe that the blandishment of the Spider's gold was indeed, as the A'Rak alleged, merely a gesture of grateful reimbursement.

But deluded by both need and hope as most citizens were, no one was so dense as to be truly unafraid. It only needed to be noised abroad that the old magnates were fleeing their mansions and properties, to spark the panic lying not so deeply buried in every Hagian heart.

And here came the Ecclesiarch truly up against it: he was sure that the god was offering this donative to fetter his flock for further feeding on—to fat himself for the fight he faced. The hard thing was, the priest wanted just what the Spider did: that no one should escape the imperiled city. He understood that it was vital to ensure that *everyone* be caught in the monster's toils—for only his whole city, united by mortal necessity, could summon the desperate force necessary to gut the alien monster, and root him and his spawn forever from the hills of Hagia. Dire emergency alone could liberate his nation at one stroke, in one vast, bloody engagement. The priest must court this holocaust, for nothing less could end two hundred years of tyranny.

The ambition I had seen in the man's clear eyes, in the cultivated muscle of his frame, did not fail, in the end, to steel him to necessity. He could not in any case long hesitate, before the first defectors of the cynical Old Money class would be taking ship.

Therefore, before the sun was yet an hour high, he dispatched his six most trusted sextons to selected households, to subject their servants to a tactful inquisition; the retainers on these staffs could say much about other households as well, and Pandagon thus shortly learned from his returning

spies of fevered preparations for flight even now in progress within-doors of no less that half a score of the most imposing manses of Big Quay.

These houses were not inhabited by monsters; their tenants were not all Fursten Majors. More than half were families who were friends, or at least acquaintances, with Paanja's own kin—people he dined with, had known in the Academy. Notwithstanding, by mid-day, the Ecclesiarch had squads of men-at-arms posted within doors at every one of these manses, and all their inhabitants placed, however apologetically, under rigorous house-arrest.

The rest of his day was a whirl of business, filled with the dispatching of sacerdotal epistles, and wagon teams, to a dozen Monastia that stood in a ten-league radius round Big Quay. Gold would be a-loading far into the night at these Monastia, and must be conveyed before sunrise into Keelyard Square, where extensive arrangements for the Donative must also be made this same day. Thus Pandagon was not to learn until after the fact, from one of his sextons, that the man had been summoned to the altar pit by the "voice" of the god, and that the god had required from him the details of all these quarantined abodes.

These divine enquiries had melancholy consequences, only partly known now by reconstruction. Collabris Collaginous the Fifth, for example, warehouse and riverfleet magnate, lay in his vast marbled baths down in the basement level of his manse. Despite the presence of the Ecclesiarch's men-at-arms in his quarters above, the magnate was apparently undeterred from his projected departure from Big Quay, for several of his scribes and secretaries stood round him in the pale obscurity of the scented steam, inditing at their master's dictation drafts on his various 'Count Houses, and instructions to his stablers for particular carriages and teams. The scribes were sweating in full livery, while Collaginous lay waist-deep in the perfumed waters, his face and chest swathed in an aromatic mudpack for his complexion.

We may confidently imagine the august Collaginous to have been the only one speaking at the penultimate moment. Perhaps he interrupted himself to ask, "What is that?"—for these vast tiled baths so loved in Big Quay were

most echosome, and there must have been a noise of steps—many, many steps, all quick and light! His servitors would have paused, and heard it too, that susurrous, scratchy commotion from the adjacent room where the boilers were fed by the water conduits webbing the city's foundations.

And how quickly thereafter would the fragrant steam have buckled and roiled with the onrush of their fate? Would they have had an instant to guess that fate, before it sprang bristled and fanged from the vapors, and pierced them through gullet and brainpan and spine? We do know Collaginous stirred scarcely an inch before stricken. His remains still sat propped waist deep in the water, his mudpack dried to a solid shell which the shrivelled husk of his body no longer filled, not even by half.

Phlatulice Grabben-Huggett, whose manse was the loftiest in its row of splendid establishments, made an eyrie of her upper apartments whence she kept a keen eye on the neighboring fortunes. Not given to waste spying time on sleeping, she had witnessed Old Fursten Major's laden wagons waddling Quay-wards in the grey pre-dawn. She'd set her servants hopping the instant she'd wrung from them tidings of the Choosing, and the coming donative. Never intermitting her vigilance, she saw the Ecclesiarch's squads of men-at-arms approaching her neighbors' doors, and modified her tactics on the spot. She made an appearance belowstairs to acknowledge her apologetic jailers, and have them brought refreshments. Retiring abovestairs again, she deputed her two most agile footmen—Binque and Squatulus—to courier duty across the rooftops of her neighbors. These nimble minions footed it all morning on cornice, eave, and raingutter, bearing away her drafts, returning with specie, and then hasting away again to secure vehicles, and various provisions.

The key preparations were now to be made. Squatulus she sent belowstairs to inquire discreetly of her Chief Footman how to proceed in hiring some men-at-arms of their own, to deliver Dame Phlatulice from her enforced sequestration. Binque, after careful instructions, she dispatched from her window on the mission of hiring a certain daring galley-captain she knew of.

As Binque clambered once more out the window, his mistress jerked her bell pull and exclaimed, "Squatulus! What's keeping the idiot!? Time is of the essence!"

And then there was a swift-moving tread outside her boudoir door. Binque, pausing on a parapet, looked back through the window now one rooftop distant. He saw the boudoir door fly open, saw it was not Squatulus erupting through it, and fell from the parapet to crash unconscious in a debris of crushed packing crates which buried his stunned shape, and saved his life. And as he fell he carried down the image of what did come through his Dame's door, and jailed her in its cage of thorny legs, and pierced and pierced and pierced her with its polished fangs. . . .

By darkfall—by the time I was preparing my entrance of the Haggardscroft Fane—the highways for leagues around Big Quay were loud with hooves and harness, and the outbound rattle of heavy freight-wagons running empty, all of them bound for monastia.

And around midnight or a bit before—about when we were steering our bizarre cargo out into the middle of Haggardscroft Lake, and harkening with terror as, here and there, faint groping spiderthought flared, sensing our presence—it happened that Prelate Pankard of KlarvKoffert Monastium, in the dark of his bed, began to dream a most vivid and unusual dream.

Pankard knew with the strangest clarity that he was dreaming, but dreamed with conviction nonetheless, dreamed that he arose, and stepped barefoot and bare-shanked out into the monastium's chilly stone corridors. Though he felt the chill of the stone in his dream, somehow he minded this not at all.

As he walked on in this strange, knowing dream, he passed one of the clerks' dormitories; the broad chamber was sonorous with snores. He passed the suites of the Proctors, the Senior Brothers, and the chambers of others of the higher ranked eremites. All these chambers, doorless by monastial rule, breathed silence.

Where was he walking in his dream? Pankard asked himself, and knew at once the answer. He was going down to the basement vaults, deep under the congregational courtyard at the heart of the walled compound. The vaults were the heart, the deep-buried hub of the monastium's octagonal wheel of chambers and offices and corridors.

Still knowing that he dreamed, Pankard dreamed he was in the vaults themselves, and he found his hands were full of Hagia's gold kolois. Hagia's kolois were a coinage prized world-wide, their gold nigh pure. They circulated rarely—most moved only from vault to vault among Monastia, when investors oceans away tendered drafts.

As Pankard held these heavy coins someone gently whispered in his ear:

These were struck from the first gold I showed your people, the first gold I helped you find under these green Hagish hills we share.

"A'Rak?" Pankard's dreamed self asked aloud, amazed, delighted. His outer self too was delighted, the one knowing this dream for a dream, and just watching it. Both of these Pankards were delighted.

When they found it where I directed, your forebears cried aloud in their joy.

"Of course!" beamed both of the Pankards. How easy, how friendly it was to talk to the A'Rak! How had he ever felt fear of this loving god? "Who would not? And who would not thank you most ardently for it, great A'Rak?"

Yet further I guided you, bade you build warehouses on your goodly riverbank, and told you no wealth in your keeping would ever be stolen.

"Thus you did, yes great A'Rak! And with those kolois we wooed trade! We bought Kadrash fruit in bumper harvests and sap cake from Kairnheim at times of glut, and warehoused them to sell at Fregor in famine and to whelkers of the Great Reefs when the Tidals had swept the mulch from their whelk-beds . . ."

Dreaming Pankard's voice shook, as he was swept up in the rhapsody of A'Rak's generosity. "For eastbound or westbound argosies we were easier reached than crossing the Agon, even as you pointed out, great A'Rak! We made fortunes as factors! Merchants left their gold in Big Quay, and weighed anchor re-cargoed from our warehoused hoards!"

And further still I guided you, and bade you build such cloisters as your own, and rent out your gold to others, and lodge others' gold secure, and told you once more, that no wealth in your holding would ever be stolen.

"And we then warehoused gold itself, great A'Rak! Yes! Drafts on our monastia were good as gold half the world over! Hills of coins lodge with us now! They lie nigh unmoving save in our ledgers!"

Have you not lived well here in my lovely, spacious cloister—all of you? Have you not known generations of safety and ease?

"Yes we have, great A'Rak!" Both conscious Pankard and dreaming Pankard were feeling a tender, almost ecstatic gratitude, but conscious Pankard was mildly startled, for their answer had a chorus of echoes. But dreaming Pankard was not startled in the least by the fact that now in this dream all of the other members of the monastium—from Arch-Monast Geldergrab, down to the lowliest clerk—were standing around him, that in fact the whole cloister stood in the vault with him, all half-robed or naked, all of them apparently called from their beds as he had been. But conscious Pankard, just for a moment, had the distinct impression that he was not only *dreaming* all this, but that every one of them was in *fact* standing together down here, just as they did in the dream.

But the startlement passed quickly. What if this were so? What should he fear? Were they not convoked here in love and amity for great A'Rak, to bask in the warmth of his love? Learn his wishes and fulfil them with joy?

My wish, dear friends and allies, is to share this wealth with our fellow Hagians—to carry a tithe of these riches up to the courtyard, and to load it in wagons that wait there. Let us now unite in this joyful labor!

And it *was* joyful labor! As Pankard toiled among the half-clad monasts, shouldering pots and bags of gold coin, and marching up the long stone flights with them, it seemed he and his colleagues sang a silent hymn as they worked, such unity and harmony did he feel in their work. It was as if the god shared his strength with them, even as he had shared his gold. Here was Pankard bearing carelessly on his shoulder a crock of coin that should have bent him double. It put him in mind of the far smaller satchel he'd conveyed up these same steps but two nights past—how heavy that had been!

This recollection had a strange and powerful effect on him. The crock on his shoulder suddenly became so much heavier he staggered under it and almost fell, and his bare feet suddenly felt the painful cold of the stone. Now the stream of his toiling, half-naked fellows all round him became a terrifying reality—his sense of the dream had shrunk, as it were, to a dim voice murmuring a tale in his inner ear.

In fact, were they not all mesmerized? Were they not all sunk in a vision imposed on them from without?

An instinctive terror made him, with immense effort, sustain his burden and maintain his tranced gait, as if their controller were literally watching them. Indeed, the warm insulation of the dream fiction remained, as it were, near at hand—he felt it quick to rise and warm him if he but assented the least bit to its comfort.

But conscious Pankard, once snagged awake by an accident of recent memory, remembered more of his mission for the Ecclesiarch, in another instant had unearthed a memory that would not let him slip back into sleep. It was a remark of the Ecclesiarch's, seeing him off home again after the delivery of the cull and the military funds. The robust Pandagon had helped his feebler old schoolmate into his coach, and while he was leaned thus near he had said, reverting to the tone of their schooldays,

"Listen, Pankie old fellow. Our god is a hungry god, and he grows hungrier still of late. A staunch employee like yourself would not be remarked upon,

if you took a bit of a sabbatical from your monastium? A sabbatical abroad?" When Pankard had blinked uncomprehendingly at this, Pandagon, after a brief air of inner struggle, patted his shoulder and bade him good night.

Now, staggering into the moon-drenched central courtyard of the monastium on his frozen feet, under his crushing burden, something very close to comprehension dawned upon the timid Pankard. He staggered with his neighbors to the nearest wagon—ringing spills of coin sang on the planks; moon-silvered dunes of gold rose in the wagons.

Back to the vaults, beloved allies! There we will render services still more glorious!

Pankard joined the stream of monasts returning down the endless stairs to the vaults, but now he moved with conscious dissimulation. The dream fiction was no more than a strange warm numbness in his legs, an anaesthetic glow that would perhaps have re-engulfed him readily enough, had not terror's blade of ice been now firmly planted in his heart.

Pankard had always thought of himself as a man absolutely devoid of physical daring, but now, amid the half-clad ecstatics flowing down the stony flights, Pankard slowed, and maneuvered, and began to fall back in the stream—a terrifying act, if this entranced host were being followed by one of the gods. . . . As he neared the tail of the column, he dared not look back to learn the truth, but, eyes frozen forward, slowed, and slowed, and felt his dreaming fellows jostle past him.

Until cold, empty air on the backs of his legs and his neck told him he had only empty corridor behind him.

Still he dared not stop completely, dared not make his consciousness plain to anything that might lurk farther back. In dread of revealing himself, still he followed the tail of the column.

And then the great brazen door of the vault was in view below, and those heading the line were already ecstatically filing inside. Pankard, still up on

the last flight of stairs, had an angled view into the vault, such that he could see something which, after a moment, finally made him stop, and stand frozen.

It was the god's crevice he saw, the black fissure in the stone whence, so recently, the god's thought had welled out to him during the Rune Reading. . . . But what had happened to that fissure? It had grown so *big*! Yes, there, and there, its stone margins were newly broken. How it yawned now! Ten men might enter it abreast. . . .

And did so! For the column marched unhesitatingly *into* the ebon aperture.

Onward, my dear devotees! Advance to our glad gathering-together, to the harvest of our amity, our harmony! Oh hasten ye hither!

Like wind off a desert, the spiderthought's whelm had a warm, potent push to it—Pankard almost hurried forward, fearful he would be late, that the vault door would close and seal him out of that glad harvest of amity and harmony. . . . So near did he come to this that the strength of his recoil made him stagger backwards, and fall upon the steps behind him.

Thus he lay low, up near the turning of the stairwell, as the last of his cloistermates poured into the vault. Full half of them had vanished through the crevice already, and the others strode rapturously towards it, when from either side of the doorway of the vault, thorny black legs dropped like crooked prison bars over a dozen men at a stroke, and polished black fangs fell stabbing and piercing and poisoning, again and again and again.

Now they were everywhere in the vault, the bristly jagged legs jailing, the soulless eyeknobs glittering avidly as they settled to the feast, while the cries that filled the vault were echoed by other, similar cries from within the black fissure: the half-conscious shrieks of dreaming men who did not quite believe that the agony that clove them was real, nor that their guts and their brains were melting, dissolving indeed in the caustic flux that filled them.

Prelate Pankard found his feet then and no mistake. And thus it happened that he was the sole survivor from all of the half-score monastia which on

that same evening contributed to the A'Rak's golden donative that took place on the morning that followed.

LAGADEME VIII

We circled the rim of Haggardscroft Lake, looking for shadow enough to hide from the moon under. Our monstrous cargo, slipping into the dark and out again into the moonlight, assailed my sight like a recurrent nightmare—its vandalized eyes, its fangs all burnt and fused together, the shaggy spheroid of its abdomen. . . .

We were in dread of the shore, now that we knew our captive, though paralyzed, was sending out an impalpable but powerful summons to his brothers, drawing them and their hunger hitherwards with each passing moment. At length we found a cove rimmed by grandfather trees where we could moor in the blackest moonshadow while still a good two or three rods off the bank.

Across the lake, which was perhaps most of a mile in breadth, moonlight limned the slate roofs and fieldstone walls and docking floats of a modest fishing village, but not the least glimmer of candle or murmur of voice reached us across the black pane of water. Not even a breeze woke the lakeside woods to a whisper. In this stillness, without the comfort of the least distraction, our captive's pent sentience, the roil of muddled spiderthought like a subtle silken stir in its hideous frame, tortured our nerves.

Here was the Ephesionite, sitting on one of the clear corners of raft unencumbered by the monster, hugging his knees and gazing up at the moon with an appearance of calm I found inexplicably irritating. I approached him, not aware of what I wanted with him, but finding, once I opened my mouth, that I had plenty to say to him.

"You know, Nifft, discounting for everything—for our manipulation by forces outside us, for happenstance and mishap—discounting all that, I find myself still powerless to understand how you could have done it in the first instance?"

"Done what, good Nuncio?"

"Signed on with us at all, knowing this to be the spidergod's country, and yourself to be a thief."

"I am no different from folk of any other profession, Dame Lagademe. I assume that if I encounter the worst, I will survive it. Your reasoning, forgive me, is specious in the extreme! Applied to yourself, how could *you* engage *me*, knowing as you did that the post—especially in a country such as this—involved danger to my life?"

"Forgive me in turn, oh Ephesionite felon, but the risks of the Nuncial trade are incurred in the service of an honorable endeavor, and arise from the wickedness of the world around the Nuncio. Our perils do not arise from our own felonious practices!" Our companions were making shushing noises, but my blood was rather up, I am afraid. Nifft made a great show of dignity.

"I must tell you, Nuncio, that I find the terms `felon' and `felonious' rather offensive."

"Then what of `felony'—for all thievery *is* felony!"

"Only in its criminal aspect."

"Its criminal *aspect*?" (I was trying to whisper and shout at the same time.) "Thievery *is* criminal! Purely and simply and completely!"

"Thievery from a thief is only *technically* criminal, but *substantially* innocent, for the guilt of the victim cancels that of the thief! I have never stolen from any but the rich and powerful—that is to say, other thieves. I have stolen at will from demons, of course, but surely you will not call *that* a crime!"

"What I call a *crime* is just such crooning *cant* and sophistry as you are spewing forth!" Both Olombo and Bantril had laid gentling hands on my shoulders, but I was fair launched, and the darkness looked red through the

flush of my rage. "Oh, smooth as cream you are, you vile, plausible foot-pad! Foolish youth would lap up your swill and judge it sweet, but serve *me* none of your slops! Alas my dear son, to have fallen prey to such suave swine as this!"

"Your *son* . . . ?"

Who is that with you, Brother, and how is it you seem to stand upon the water?

This mute surge of spiderthought swept over us, as the breaking surf rolls over the seaside bather. From the dense lakeshore woods it whelmed—so close and clear! We were jolted, and I felt a flux of terror that the spawn had actually leapt upon our raft, till I heard the wet hush of our slavewater, and realized our raft was in motion, skimming smartly along, away from shore but at a diagonal, as the witch tried to keep us in treeshadow while we fled.

Are you hurt? Who are your human company, and why are they uneaten. . . .

We skirted nigh a mile of lake-rim, the moonlight avalanching down on us now and again, drenching us in visibility, but no further alien salutation touched our nerves. The witch was gesturing us all aboard the monster's flat fore-section. We crouched there, an arm's length from the great scabbed incision in the swelling abdomen, that monstrous vault wherein we'd laid Pompilla.

"Mark you close now," growled the witch, her eyes almost phosphorescent. "They scent the wounded meat and will be coming thicker. The food-scent's already assembling them, but very shortly, they'll sense Pompilla too as she comes awake. The water masked her tread upon their earth while she was still enchrysallized. But now, as she nears her eclosion, and they draw nearer, there'll be no hiding her presence—buds of their Sire, they are all born with a keen alertness to her scent. I know not how long she will need to emerge, but until she does, she can be slain and devoured by the least of the spawn that begin, even now, to encircle us. Once we're known, hiding

won't matter, and we must make for center-lake and stand siege. It's our luck they swim poorly in open water."

"How do you mean we'll be standing siege, witch?" asked Mav.

"It will involve more thaumaturgy—bless me for having been so frugal of it thus far! You've no more to do now than stand ready to discharge my orders on the instant."

The witch made some gestures in the direction of the fishing village. Nothing happened.

In the long silence that followed, the witch stood fixed and mute as stone. All the rest of us did the same, at first harkening mainly for another prickly probe of spiderthought to reach out of the black circling forest and touch our spines anew, but as the minutes stretched out, we also began harkening for any sign that the witch's summons would produce any result at all.

Then there came a far, slight silvery chuckle of movement on the water, and a small dark shape detached itself from a distant shadow and moved slowly out onto the moon-silvered expanse of mid-lake.

In a moment it was two, then three little shapes floating towards us. A while more, and we saw what they were: three small, empty vessels drifting in a wandering kind of way—bowfirst, then broadside, then stern-first, trailing their painters and dawdling towards us. One was a little one-masted yawl and the other two were skiffs, their oars waggling in the locks like broken wings they trailed as they advanced. At length all bumped softly up against our raft.

"Clear them out and lift the oars out of their locks," said the witch. It was the yawl I stepped into, not knowing what she meant by "clear them out" till I found, on the bottom amidships of her a shrivelled shape like a heap of wrinkled shadows. When I dropped it overboard, the mummied corpse floated a moment like a dead leaf, till its torn night-gown grew soaked, and dragged it under. One skiff was empty, but no less than three poor souls had made it to the other skiff before they were stricken and devoured.

Of the oars the witch improvised strange weapons—or such I assumed them to be, for she was now uncommonly short-spoken. She required of me, Olombo, Bantril and Shinn our swords. Against the blade of each oar she laid the hilts of a sword, so that the swordblade protruded past the tip of the oarblade. She walked astern of our huge captive and, with the butt of one of Nifft's javelances, smote the spinnerettes at the abdomen's caudal tip, and muttered a formula. The spinnerettes emitted a phosphorescent leakage, which she—twisting the spearbutt—wound round it in the manner of thread on a spindle. With this ghost silk, twisting the spearbutt in the opposite direction, she bound the sword hilts tight against the oarblades.

Brother! . . . on the lakewaters . . . ?

This feathery touch of spiderthought came from afar. I thought the dread of it had tensed me as I stood harkening for more, but when the next whelm followed almost instantly, I jumped a foot at least, so near at hand it was—upon the shore just opposite our raft:

Why do you evade me, my brother? You are hurt, I perceive. Approach, that I may feed on you . . . what is it that ails you, it hath a most menacing aura —what hath hurt you? Why can you not speak, brother—stay and I will come to thee. . . .

Even now our slavewater was moving us smoothly offshore—in an instant we were bathed in moonlight, and making for open water, our summoned skiffs and yawl keeping pace with us. We were not half a furlong from shore when the foliage near our moorage stirred, and a massy spawn, nigh half the size of our own, sprouted from the boskage and melted into the shadowy water. We moved far faster than it—we were two furlongs away before it swam, a glittery turmoil of legs, out into the moonlight.

"Praise be they're bottom walkers," Mav said. "See how spastic he swims!"

"But they'll be coming thick and fast," said the witch. "Do you not feel her now?"

The hum of garbled mentation in our captive had grown sketchier and more frantic—a thoughtless whine of panicked sentience. Something was astir in the guts of our paralyzed monster.

But the woods round the lake were also astir. Here was a faint flare of spiderthought, reaching out to meet us from whither we steered to—and here came the feathery touch of another from our portside.

"By the Black Crack!" spat the witch, "the gluttonous filth converge! They sense her now, and cry each other on. They'll be swimming the surface and they'll be coming across the lakefloor as well."

We had reached the lake's center. "Here we will stand," said the witch. "You, thief, and hill-girlie, you—you twain will be leaving us now. Hark ye, Thief, closely—give me my map again, Nuncio!"

She snatched the vellum from me, and rent it in half with one sharp, surprisingly powerful pull of her pudgy hands. "What I will pen ye now," she told the thief, "is a missive to the A'Rak himself, and you must deliver it in person—stow your askings, and listen only! The ink this sending is writ in will secure your audience, I think—give me thy bodkin."

Plucking his poignard, the witch strode to the A'Rakspawn's abdomen and slashed it. A freshet of the monster's black blood spattered on the raft, and in this she dipped the dagger's tip again and again, penning with its steel fang on the backside of the map's vellum.

She wrote at length, then scrolled it up quick, and bade the thief thrust it in his belt. "You and the hill-girlie—put the 'shaw in that skiff and lash it down strongly. Past that dead village the highway runs, and down it the 'shaw will convey you, for I will call up a neffrit to the yokepoles, and it will be fighting to go the instant I bind him there. Be quick, for the pair of you must be away without losing an instant. Thou, Nuncio, and thou, puller" (she meant Bantril) "board the yawl with thy sword-tipped oars, and ye two, likewise in that skiff."

We did as she directed, and while Mav and Nifft lashed down the 'shaw in their skiff, Jaundyssa again went astern of the A'Rakspawn. With her left hand she summoned the air, and a little devil-wind, a vortex of breeze, began spinning above her head. She kicked the spawn's spinnerettes and made a repeated pulling motion in the air with her right hand.

At her kick, pallid strands of ghostweb snaked up from the spinnerettes, and twisted themselves in a single cable which fed itself into her busily working right hand. The right hand drew this upwards, and touched its end to the whirlwind, round which the strand was snatched as onto a spindle. The vortex turned white with its wrapping of silk, and after a moment began to fling up a broad, gauzy banner that floated upon the air, snaking lazily, doubling back on itself, the loops of the banner fusing edge to edge into a supple sheet that hung in a broadening dome above the raft.

She left the whirlwind at its work and found Mav and Nifft just completing their lashing-down of the 'shaw in their skiff. The witch made a gesture towards the lashed 'shaw, uttered a rusty cry, and on that instant the vehicle's yoke-poles sprang out to the horizontal and it surged and quaked within its bonds, causing the skiff to rock on the water.

The witch addressed the departing pair. "The neffrit will stop, though none too long, hill-girlie, at Haggis. There dismount, and call your folk to arms, and gather all such highlanders as can be gathered and weaponed and brought to Big Quay post haste! Bring them along the ridgeline behind the city, and into the crags where the stadium stands, and there await how matters do unfold in the streets below.

"Thou, Thief, seek out that Ecclesiast of thine that put gold in thy pouch. Seek him straight without delay, and have him tell the god you are a thief desiring amnesty and audience that you might deliver him tidings urgent for his safety. If he gives ye safe conduct, it's likelier than not the monster will honor it. He's still trying to play patron and protector down in the city, lest his townsfolk fodder should flee before they are boxed in for feeding on. Mind now ye rig yourselves tight to the 'shaw, or ye may not survive the neffrit's conveyance. Now be off!"

Mav and Nifft had to grip the gunnels, for the witch's dismissing wave sent the skiff skimming off towards the village she'd summoned it from, rocking as it went with the neffrit's invisible struggles in the traces. But then it was our own gunnels we had to grip, as the witch leapt into the yawl with Bantril and me and shrilled, "Stand steady!" and waved again, and our yawl, and Shinn and Olombo's skiff, surged up into the moonlit air.

"Thou, puller!" she called to Shinn, "stand at stern, thou hast the piloting. Push with thy feet, lean with thy body, and find the way of it now! Thou, spearman! Stand in the bows, and the two of ye, hold your weapons thus!" She gripped her sword-tipped oar by the haft like a harpoon when held two-handed for planting at close quarters.

Meanwhile the airy loom she had set in motion never ceased to work. It was manufacturing from our Pompilla's paralyzed host a growing dome of ghostsilk in the air above him, and its skirts dangled ever lower, now circumferencing our raft and hanging not two fathoms from the water—but we were snatched away from the sight as our keels swerved, and clove the air in the direction of the shore.

And here it came below, our pursuer, shattering the silver water-pane with the thorny turmoil of his laboring legs. It was not an apt swimmer—its bulge of abdomen was a drag on its progress, and its legs' movement wrongly rhythmed for efficient swimming.

Still, its awkwardness did not lessen the horror of its gemstone eyes flashing with the drench of torn waters, and now down upon that infernal constellation of soulless ocular knobs the witch, with a thrust of her legs and a cant of her body, swooped our yawl. Down we arced and she, with her oar gripped like the elongate sword-hilt it was, swept a blazing stroke that lopped off all four left-side legs of the spawn, which was sized but thrice our yawl. The spawn made for the bottom, then, but—its stroking now all unilateral—beat instead a frothy circle on the lakesurface.

"Use yours like stabbing-harpoons on its eyes!" Jaundyssa shrilled to Bantril and Olombo in their skiff, and Bantril, lithe monkey that he was,

kicked the skiff into a dive, then pulled it up to a hover just over the fangs. The oars—as I felt with my own—were witchly lightened and fairly manageable, and they stabbed ruin into its eyes, while our yawl rose away to make its second swoop.

Our second plunge was astern of her abdomen, and Shinn and I added our blades to Jaundyssa's, slashing wide chasms in the monster's abdomen, and sundering her spinnerettes till, up from these welled the ghostly storm, and a glad, unpent tumult of spirits rocked our airborne craft on a great gust of joy.

And in all this swift battle, no surge of the spawn's thought touched us. It seemed the water bottled in the mental outreach of the monsters.

Our own prey, however, dry on his raft, remained a beacon to his hungry brothers, though already a great dome of ghost-silk, flowing from his own innards, canopied both him and raft, its skirts sinking even now into the water as our new victim sank under the lake beneath us.

"His meat will not stop drawing them," said the witch—she'd hung us right on the breeze beside the skiff—"even after his cocoon's closed up beneath the raft. And they're groping along the lakefloor by now as well as swimming, and soon they'll be bobbing up from the bottom, hit or miss—some far off, while others will attain the cocoon and seize hold. And I tell ye gravely, if they assault the webwall itself, then but let them come big enough, or numerous enough, and they will tear their way through with their fangs and feed on Pompilla before she can rise in her own defence."

Already, in several directions, we saw the glitter of toiling spiderlegs denting the silver lake-surface—there, and there, and there, and all, though uncertainly, converging toward us. The towering ghost-silk eggshell was shot with feverish flashes of unearthly rainbow—a huge polychrome gem ripening in the black and white waste of moonlit water, with whispery gusts of voices coming off it like cold off of ice. Meanwhile, just then, the shoreline shadow swallowed up the skiff that was taking Nifft and Mav and their demon-drawn 'shaw to the highway.

NIFFT VIII

We made a smooth but rocking progress over the lake, for the neffrit, invisible to us, surged powerfully against the yokepoles of the 'shaw where the witch had chained it. It made our skiff wobble as we skimmed into the dark of forest shadow that veiled the fishing village.

Fishing hamlet, really. Even in silhouette we clearly saw its littleness: two docks and a half score of little motley craft. Not one of these but was still moored. The terror came upon them too fast to allow them even to cast off. The dead littered the docks and sprawled amidships of the craft, pitiful splayed husks that were here and there buckled and bent to the shape of the gunnel or bollard or pierpost they'd lain across when they were pierced and drained.

The 'shaw in its undercarriage had slats and clamps for enlarging the cargo board, very ticklish to extract and install, what with the heavings of our sullen, shapeless demon engine. At its biggest the platform offered just room enough for two riders to lie face-down on. We rigged lashings with just slack enough to slip ourselves—legs, hips, and shoulders—underneath them. I thought of previous fast, jostling rides I had taken, and said, "Padding. Padding between us and the platform."

How unwillingly did we advance down the little pier, our legs unwilling to walk where spawn might lurk crouched to spring. From the nearest source —a moored yawl with three dead, caught in a heap and their husks thus fused amidships—we slashed quick jagged swatches of sailcloth.

Tucking ourselves under the lashings, with the canvas between our fronts and the boards, was tricky. We got me wedged in, and my swordhilts clear for pulling from my back, and then I stretched the lashings wide to let Mav slip, a bit easier, in beside me. I reached my swordblade down under the platform between it and the wheel towering by my shoulder. I gingerly laid my steel's edge on the cable that lashed our wheels to the bottom of the skiff. Mav gave me a nudge and I turned to find myself meeting the cool

stare of her pale eyes from very close range. "I have caught you noticing, honest thief," she told me, "that though I am slightish of stature, I have a mickle weighty pair of teats bound up in my bodice." Her icy eyes conveyed no clue to how she took what she reported.

I answered suavely, "I—" and cleared my throat. "I must apologize, then, respected Mav, for a wholly unintended solecism."

"Just watch yourself in future, then. Cut away!"

Cut I did. The 'shaw sprang clean out of the skiff. Its wheels touched the planks of the docks but fleetingly, with a crunching beneath of the prey-husks. There was a blur of sparse cottages, of an inn whose shingle creaked in the wind of our passage, and the next instant there was highway beneath us, a roaring blur of pavement which, still, our wheels touched only now and then.

We floated, made bone-rattling contact with canvas and wood beneath, flattening our faces each time, and then floated once more. I felt like just such a piece of roast as a cook is seen hammering to make it more tender. Painfully, we developed a sense of the rhythm and how to brace for it, but that ride remained gruelling hard work none the less.

At such a velocity, scant hours must bring us whence three days of travel had brought us, and our ambush by hungry spawn seemed most unlikely. Not so. As we plunged toward the floor of a valley, and the forest loomed near, the neffrit stunned us by snatching the 'shaw high in air—a leap that might have cleared a middling tall tree. Right below, an a'rakspawn big as a cottage sprang onto the highway just where we would have been, and even as we saw it the 'shaw dropped straight down on it, crushing the abdomen, and disgorging a pallid effusion of escaping ghosts who rushed with a sound like glad breathing up into the sky, though that airy acclamation was instantly lost behind us as we rocketed on down the highway.

I won't drag you, dear Shag, through each league of that jaw-rattling, rib-cracking ride through the moonlight's long delirium. The subworld brute that pulled us brought us so sharply to halt at Mav's Haggis that we nigh

shot straight out of our lashings. Stunned and sore she eased out of her perch, her eyes already looking hungrily in the direction of her 'stead and her daughters. "I'll have folk, and no less than tenscore—" she was shouting now as I was whirled off "some hours past noon in the ridge above Big Quay. . . ."

And it seemed, blessedly, but a scant time after that I was whirled into Big Quay itself—and still some two hours before dawn, it appeared. I careened down near empty streets—yet streets more awake than they should at that hour have been, with more muffled lamplight behind curtains, and a sense of people everywhere, secretly, sleeplessly talking. I was yet—though soon—to learn of the golden donative prepared for the morning.

The instant he reached the plaza before the A'Rak Fane, the demon was released—so abruptly, indeed, that the poles were dropped in mid-flight, snagged on the cobbles, and flipped the whole 'shaw arse-over-teakettle, slamming me to hang with my back but a span from the pavement, and two broken wheels to either side of me.

I was so furious at this rude handling that I utterly forgot my larger situation. Snarling, I slashed off my lashings, and crawled, a crook-boned cripple, out from under the wreckage. I brought myself, painfully, to an upright posture, and glared furiously and belligerently about me at the empty plaza. And then it slowly came back to me where I was and what I was about.

I could not help but reflect that if these travel accommodations indicated the witch's general level of concern for my survival, then I had ample grounds for worry about the actual outcome of my mission, specifically, about my survival of a personal audience with the dire deity himself.

And thus it was with slow, thoughtful steps that I advanced between the great pylons of the portal, and into the half-gloom of a lobby but sparsely candled. I crossed it to the corridor—dimmer yet—into the Ecclesial quarters. When I stood outside Pandagon's doorless chamber, I found that I had him, unsuspecting, under my observation. He was in the vestmentary,

doing squats and slow stretching twists of the torso. Though a light bronze corselet was laid aside, the churchman was otherwise under arms, kilted and short-sworded and battleshod in buskins, and looking quite the field commander, in fact. I could see from his profile that Pandagon's mind was inwardly working and weighing, and his body moving by habit.

"Forgive me," I softly said. "Once more forgive my intrusion, friend Pandagon." I eked a stiff bow from my tortured frame. So alight was his mind with his work that he took me in with utter unsurprise.

"Nifft! I rejoice! My quarters are yours, and I'll brook no apology." High danger, lofty purpose, iron resolve blazed from his eyes. Paanja Pandagon had arrived at that hour of heroism which perhaps he had cherished in his heart all his life. There was a scent of impending cataclysm in the air, and a mad note of gaiety in his voice. I resolved to learn all that had passed here before playing the witch's catspaw as ordered.

"Then if this is my chamber, friend Pandagon, I invite us to sit in your study, with wine. Let me learn what has passed here, for there has truly been wildness abroad in the hills and vales of Hagia."

We took the wine neat, a venerable port, sweet fire that melted the knots from my muscles. I learned, in the course of three goblets, what I have already told you, Shag, in its place.

At the end of this I knew, of course, that our aims were one: the torch and the blade for the spidergods, come what may. But just as I was on the point of laying all I knew before him, a fateful impulse of caution stayed me.

Much I must tell him to facilitate the interview I sought with the god. But the imminence of battle I decided I must withhold. That the priest was the spidergod's foe, I did not doubt, but how far might not the god see into his mind? I must withhold how very much upon the cusp things stood. The illusion of some time to spare must make the monster's response less summary.

That Mav's force was on the march, that the witch strove to wage war upon the morrow, these I withheld. Minim was bringing the priests' own forces north, but only to deploy south of the city, to stand in readiness. Had I spoken all, who knows what horrors might have been evaded? But who can peer even one moment's depth into the future?

That I did a witch's work, and that it was she who worked to bring the A'Rak's Foe upon him, I told Pandagon. That I was a thief, had first come hither with a thievish aim, and came now from the witch for parley with the god and therefore needed amnesty arranged, I also told the priest.

Pandagon cocked his brow, and met my eye with more than a glint of humor in his own. "My old friend Minim, while engaging mercenaries, in fact became acquainted with the rather considerable reputation of one Nifft the Lean of Karkmahn-Ra. . . .

"I was not wholly surprised by the news, nor yet surprised, though having known you but briefly, to learn the stature universally accorded you in your guild."

What could I do but blush, and bow in modest acknowledgement? I tendered him the torn vellum, writ in spiderblood. "I am to read the god the words on this parchment, that the witch wrote in the blood of one of the A'Rak's bigger sons. I have not myself read them yet. Will you do the honors?"

He had not read aloud the first three words when recognition unknotted his brow. What he read to me was the rest of the ballad I'd sold him a piece of.

> But 'ware that *thou* be not the garment
> Of one whose style out-braves thine own!
> One who does not dread interment
> Where thy murdered prey have gone!

For howso thick thou be appareled
in thy woven web of woe,
Thou may'st find thyself ensnarled
At the onslaught of thy Foe.

When the wing-song of her hunger
serenades thee from the sky,
and the bright barb of her anger
seeks thy life (thou knowest why!)

Then, Oh A'Rak, thou might'st cower
When thy shield becomes thy chain
And Pam'Pel in all her power
Shall thee slay—At last! Again!

The lines rang for us again as we took the parchment between us and reread them silently. Then he looked at me. The soldierly prelate had that best gift for command in the field—quick grasp, fluid shift of tactic.

"I believe it is meant to hold him here to his center, to make him think her advent too nigh to risk a counter foray of his own. That he senses her there is no mistake, though he senses her but darkly still. Here will be my pretext. I will go to the altarpit and declare the first quatrains you brought, then say you demand an audience to deliver the rest, hoping a special bounty of gold will reward your concern for his peril. He'll believe and bounty you, I think —" (this wryly) "—for the god's in a gold-giving vein at present."

I waited in the corridor of the priestly quarters, listening to Pandagon's soft firm tread across the lobby, down into the echoy silk-webbed vault. He mounted the dais. He stood at the very rim of the black stone-walled abyss.

He did not imagine the god could be simply summoned. He resolved merely to speak down into the pit, drop his preamble, then the declamation of the lines themselves. Then he would wait and repeat his performance—a patient rite of humble invocation.

"Father A'Rak," he intoned, "a stranger has come to me bearing us tidings of danger to yourself. He has given me part of his tidings, reserving the rest till you grant him amnesty and audience to present them personally, for I am afraid, Sire, that this petitioner is a thief. He begs, for his risk and his service, some golden boon of you."

Speak the tidings, priest. I praise your promptness in my service. Disclose to me the fragment that you bear.

It all but unmanned him, the dreadful promptitude, the *nearness* of that mighty, inhumanly hungering mind. The god hugged his center indeed, and Pandagon's skin crawled at the nearness of the monster whose most recent gluttony still haunted his mind. Collecting himself, he intoned the verses that I had first brought him, three days before.

He ended. There was silence.

Bring forth this praiseworthy footpad, priest. He has my gracious amnesty, and more—my gratitude. Gold will be his when he reads me the rest of these verses. Bring him hither, and let us all three commune together.

Back came Paanja Pandagon to fetch me, as if I had not stood in the hallway eavesdropping, and I stood nerving myself, but was still all apprehension when it came to walking down under the echosome, silk-shrouded vault, approaching, at the priest's side, the dais and the yawning altar-pit. At once, the god's presence invisibly welled from the abyss:

A thief indeed you are, deep-dyed with greed and black with felonies, but your solicitude for my safety quite persuades my forgiveness, and gladly I grant you your life, and a golden meed besides, when you have shared with me your lines of . . . portent. Speak, Thief, and experience great A'Rak's gratitude!

"Awesome one!" I effused, with a fervor not altogether feigned, "your goodness quite outgoes your name for graciousness and liberality! I beg forgiveness in advance for the tenor of the lines I here repeat. Their impious, threatful tone is in itself a specimen of the enmity that lurks abroad against you; I offer you its insult solely to warn you and avert its fulfillment. Here then are the remaining verses:

> But 'ware that *thou* be not the garment
> Of one whose style out-braves thine own,
> One who does not dread interment
> Where thy murdered prey have gone. . . ."

The verses, as I intoned them, reverberated down the shaft, received by one still mercifully unrevealed to me, received by that laired, hungering, otherworldly mind, that Intruder from Beneath that had haunted the basements and vaults of this nation for well over two hundred years. . . . Were my words sowing terror in that ancient, unguessable soul? To sow terror in a titan that lurks just under your feet is itself quite terrifying, I can report—if fear indeed I did sow. All the monster's frantic feeding seemed to point to desperation. Yet the titan's mind touched us next in a note of sly, teasing humor.

You speak her very name. Pam'Pel. How grotesquely droll it is that you should speak her dread name, and all in perfect nescience of its meaning, in ignorance of the world that once was mine. I thank you truly, priest and footpad—your news has long been known to me, and I stand calm and ready for what comes. I shall pay you notwithstanding soon enough.

But first, the oddest fancy moves me. Yes, I find that the drollest impulse quite possesses me, my dear little humans: it is to impart to your brief, puny selves my past—to bequeath to you some record of my past, in case it should happen that my end in fact is near. How delicious this wistful absurdity seems to me! And, forgive me, but I must indulge it in my own

droll way—I have need, priest—you'll forgive me, won't you?—to use you for a puppet. Feel no alarm! You'll be restored immediately after. . . .

Pandagon crumpled at my side, his body going crooked as if gripped in an invisible hand. His neck went slack and his head slumped to one side and his eyes rolled back dead white. He was not standing, for his legs were too awry; he was gripped and held there, hung there like an eyeless doll.

Then his lips began to move, and a rusty whisper emerged from his mouth, the voice not his own, but a reedy, ancient quaver which, issuing from that empty face, stood the hair up all along my neck. It was in this borrowed, millennial hill-troll's voice, and mantled in the mockery of this human puppeteering, that the A'Rak spoke to me, and told me of the world of his birth, and his loss of that world.

A'RAK I

Arthro-Pan'doloron
World I was born upon . . .

My world, Thief, was Arthro-Pan'doloron, a world of lush plains richly threaded with rivers, a world of forest-crowned highlands, and of boundless jade-green seas.

Our red sun, both in its genial warmth and its vast girth, dwarfed your own pallid ember of a star. Our sun's seething sphere filled a quarter of our sky, gorgeously simmering in lavender skyscapes, or wreathed with black satin cloudrack. When it rose, upon its leading rim could be discerned in profile the banners and fountains of fire that flourished all over its surface: great sprays and high helixical arches of flame that forested our maternal star.

Our sun in majestic largess lavished life on us, baking to fullness the hosts of beings that tenanted Arthro-Pan'doloron. Our sun beamed a million forms of creature into being, and all, almost all, were my food!

Arthro-Pan'doloron teemed all the more with life because her sun was a-growing. She had been swelling in recent eons. She had, within historical memory's remotest reach, engulfed three sister worlds of ours. On each of these, in the centuries of its dying, there were races which had, by desperate contrivances, retired to the planet next outlying them. The waves of the refugees that reached my world from Arthro-pod'holobane, third from our sun and the last slain by her swelling, were a mixed lot of beings, you may be sure. This earth of yours, Thief, is a well-enough-stocked larder, I grant, but Arthro-Pan'doloron swarmed with lives of every form, a cornucopia of toothsome prey!

Had our sun not yet ceased to swell? Was our world to die in its turn, become a sphere of smoking stone? This question was so much bruited

among us that it had become the very air we breathed, and thus, a question that in truth we scarcely thought of. That our world could die we believed we knew. But when, at a stroke, it died in fact, in a manner utterly unimagined by us, our seething terror, our vast stupefaction showed that we had believed it not at all, that our world could perish . . . !

Great was the glory of the nightskies of Arthro-Pan'doloron! When we turned our back upon our sun, that crimson conjurer, so huge did she loom behind us, that faint rosy auroras rimmed even our midnight skies. But meanwhile our zenith, with no moon to dim them, blazed with a starswarm as thick as a blizzard! Oh that glorious thickness of stars! How paltry and sparse are your own starfields, Thief, when I recall the diamond swarm of them vaulting the nights of my world!

As dense as a dome were those stars, like our roof! Such a wealth of them, how could we not feel them ours, a cosmic bequest? They were the witnesses of our rich life—they were our retinue, gathered to light and to landmark our nights.

This proprietary arrogance is the folly of any life that prospers. There exists only Now for such lives, and all they survey, they seem to *own*, and their own Death is a thing which Cannot Be.

Such indeed was my own folly on the night my world died. Great was my pride, and my stature. I had just attained to my fourth moult. I now in bulk did stand preeminent among my kind through all the lands in the South East Seas. I was growing to become a monarch of my kind, and my kind was itself preeminent among predators on Arthro-Pan'doloron.

There was one greater predator than we who shared our world, but she was uncertain in her coming upon us. So unpredictable in her coming was she, that we asked ourselves if ours was the only world she found her prey upon. Among my generation it was being said that she came oftener among us than she had in our forefathers' times, but still she had not yet in my lifetime come to my part of the world. If I believed at all in catastrophe, the only form it took in my imagination was the visitation of this dire and ravening

nemesis, whose predation on my kind entailed unspeakable atrocities. But what befell on the night I tell you of, Thief, was the Unthinkable itself!

I was taking the evening air, gazing down on the seashore from the coastal hills above high-walled Kin-Kozom, whose lantern-trimmed parapets shone down on the darkling shingle of Clatterstone Strand. And as dark fell the thousands—all easy and idle—came out from the city, the glow of contentment and their after-supper wine still upon them. They strolled and mingled, and the peaceful murmur of their conversation floated above the surf-growl, as the wide Shangle Sea with its white hands of foam slowly, ceaselessly ransacked those glittering gravels.

I was still feeling that ineffable freshness that follows a moult, and I remember that evening a glorious contentment enveloped me, a serene contentment to be gazing on this plenty my planet dispread before me, this feast of forms all fashioned for my feeding!

With my attention thus engaged, I did not at first notice the horror in the sky, not till I grew aware of a new note in the voice of the multitude, and aware next of a lifting of heads and limbs and faces skywards. . . . And only then did I become aware—in the deepening night above—of a hole in the starfield.

As the stars blazed fiercer in a more perfect black, the voice of the host rose to a steady roaring of disbelief, for this round void in the stars, perhaps the size of your own full moon, grew as distinct as a jet-black coin dropped on a diamond gravel. Moreover, this hole was circumferenced with wisps of white light, as a saw's blade that sliced through the stars might spin off a dust of their torn radiance.

Does such a fancy seem madness, Thief? Then envision an utter Madness made manifest in the heavens, and you will guess the consternation that did seize us all!

It was rising, and crossing our sky, as the stars did themselves, and it was growing, yes—half again as large in its diameter it was, by the time it crossed the zenith.

As this night unfolded, all the world was gathered out of doors, and a storm of speculations roared through the gathered hosts. It must be some aberrant cloud or some flying thing. That blotted-out circle of stars had not *vanished*, after all! A vessel, then, a visitant.

But if it hovered between us and the stars, why did it rise with them? And there was something else, something I felt in the soil beneath me, and down in the planet-bone under it. I felt below a stir, a hum, a latent low note, a muttering down in the marrow of our old world.

The multitude sensed it not, but to me it was a declaration of alien forces a-working on us—a declaration that in its more muted way was as compelling as the hair-stirring spectacle above us. At length I turned and stole away inland to seek the mouths of the chasm-coombs.

The chasm-coombs of Arthro'pan were the artifacts of a giant race predating my own, predating, it was said, our sun's first reddening and growth. These deep labyrinths were dwellings, perhaps, or dungeons for yet more dire things that those giants had first won the planet from. Long had they lain tenantless, or rather haunted only by later beings nurtured in their depths, the silence of them broken only by the voices of the subterranean river which the coombs channelled down to feed the Sunless Sea. Down I plunged, then, into the coombs, down and down I sped through the long hours of night.

A hundred leagues down I went before I rested, and stood a-listening once more, down where one could overhear the planet talking to itself in deep creakings of its ancient bones. Down here, I heard the Old Bedrock speaking, in very truth! And its speech was new. The tale it told was of the planet's very foundations groaning and fretting like an old ship's timbers in a striving sea! Our world creaked and fretted as if at the nearing tread of something huge.

A prescience touched me then, though a prescience pitifully near the event itself. Young and ascendant though I was, scarcely at the threshold of my reign, I understood then that my world's annihilation was at hand.

My anguish is beyond your slight conception, Thief. Whatever nascent powers might be a-burgeoning in me, what is the future of a king whose planet dies?

Yet what if this was not our world's death, but only some grave blow she would—at least in part—survive? In that case, if disaster fell from our sky, I could retreat to the deeps of the Sunless Sea, and subsist there on the hordes of giant worms that thronged its blue-litten benthos, until the upper world's upheavals subsided.

Of course, if this *were* survival, it seemed a thing hardly better than death itself. I would retreat thus only at the last possible instant. Consuming vast reserves of my strength (for a moult is exhausting) I made haste skywards again, in torment now to know our fate's unfolding. I found at length the Fen River's channel, and followed it back up and out into the boglands it drained from, where immemorially my race hunted the hackle-tails and quoggmires.

I emerged in a dull-litten, overcast morning. There was a dense high roof of cloud rack blown in off the ocean—would the skies be hid from us tonight? One of my brethren hailed me from a careful distance. I assured him that I hungered not, and he came out in sight of me, out of a dense screen of reeds. This brother was a goodly size indeed—a contending power not many years from now, wise to skirt me in the meantime. I told him, *The deep rock hath a strange and sickly resonance. What think you?*

He answered, *I hunted the offshore this morning. The tide runneth hither and whither—nor at ebb, when it should have been, nor at flow neither, but jittery-jaggedy, as if something tugs the waters awry.*

I answered, *Worser and worser, Brother, yet wonders still multiply. You've not smelt the change in Fen River's waters I gather.*

When he'd drawn nigh enough, I pounced on and pinned him and thrust my fangs home in his brainpan, for first was my need for replenished strength. I fanged him part by part to get him dissolving, explaining, *Mere common*

sense urges food when disaster impends, brother, lest our next meal prove long in coming.

His reply, before his thought crumbled away, was sullen in tone: *Your death will prove short in coming, false-spoken vermin. All Arthropan's a meal. . . . Starhole. . . . a Galactivore's maw . . .*

My lesser brother's thoughts dissolved. I fed long and studiously; naught but the flimsiest moult-husk remained of him. What had that word of his been? Galactivore? What could that mean? I had no time for musing on it.

For I required instant knowledge of the sky, masked by this malignant vault of cloud, and I believed I could gain such knowledge from the crawbags. I hastened inland at once, following the Fen River's channel.

Of all our winged denizens, the crawbags were arch-navigators of the atmosphere. They sold information for meat quick enough too. For some paralyzed prey to stretch on their curing racks, they sold my race the fruits of their aerial reconnaissance: the movement of the snerrl herds on the tundras, to forearm us for our winter hunting.

I hastened by gully and channel inland, going discretely not to fright off others, on whom I eavesdropped as I went. What a war of terrified tongues raged all around! City and market-town, farmstead and cattlefold, cosmologists were everywhere on this dire, overcast morning:

"*Hole*? But the stars are a blizzard we're in, a sunfall falling near and far, falling infinitely far in all directions! In this what *hole* is possible? The universe itself is one great hole we all fall through!"

My tarsal claws were fluent in the dozen tongues that rumored through my natal soil. I went gingerly fast, harkening, wondering as avidly as did any of my prey. We all had the one roof in common, I found: and that was *no* roof —no roof at all against the naked Nothing that we spin through. I had thought at one time or other that my prey were pathetic—their flimsy defences, their marginal sustenance toilingly gained and so precarious. But now understanding had touched me. I, on my throne in a world of my prey,

was in this hour no better housed than the least of my food. One breeze off of the titanic machinery of stars could blow me roofless and set me spinning away, a dustmote, into the Great Outside.

A valley of canopy forest now lay between me and Chalk Bones Scarp where Crawbags reliably eyried. I skirted it rather than crossing—the Kankerdanks' habitations densely roofed the forest. They wove wicker, withe, and vine into catwalks and pathways and basketwork cottages light and tight as drums. The Crawbags I sought came down here from the Scarps and hunted the Kankerdanks' pups and dams. In defense, the resolute 'danks made gliders that could ride on updrafts for hours at a time on great basketwork vanes, and from these the 'dank aerialists in reprisal deployed flaming siege oil on the 'bags' eyries from bellows-powered pneumatic cannon.

The 'danks were my world's arch-archivists and foremost in the commerce of learning. Their lexical societies and etymological sodalities had preserved, and cultivated all the major tongues of the three nearer worlds our genial, expansive sun had swallowed in her rubicund matronly age. I would have been interested to speak with people of such ingenious tenacity —I often indulged myself in discourse with my food, or food-to-be. I find the intricacy of smaller lives exquisite. Still, I skirted the danks' forest valley, for they had a science of dispensing burning oil which was precisely adjusted to my own race's few weak points, and were quite skilled at burning out one's eyes, or many of them. This a brother I was feeding on obligingly surrendered, upon my inquiring how he had lost six of his own.

West of the 'dankish woods, high stone bluffs rose sheer from bushy terrain. Fissures split the cliffs in segments. Crawbags chose the most islanded sections for their rookeries, moated round by the deepest fissures.

I soon spied a crest crowned by several little crude gibbets of deadwood with what looked like bloated 'dank pups hung splay-leg in the ropes. Crawbags called these "curing frames," where prey hung to putresce a little and be maggoted. Crawbags, before they had—by grotesque contrivance—made themselves into strong-pinioned raptors, had been but crude aerialists:

leaping gliders, who dove from trees for carrion and then scrambled back up to the boughs with it. Though their toughness, ingenuity, and profitable symbiosis with the gorgon-fly now made them potent predators, they retained that gustatory bias towards spoiled flesh.

I began climbing up the face of the next cliff northward from the gibbeted one, studiously avoiding the appearance of assault, since—my ascent made—a gulf would yet yawn between me and their roost.

I'd climbed scarce tenscore cubits up the cliff when a pair of the 'bags coasted in from hunting, barbed nets dangling empty from their shanks. The foremost wheeled high on seeing me—Crawbags more than most abhorred my kind's indifference to sheer barriers.

He hung glaring down on my ascent, just above leaping for. I recognized him then for one of Grey Urmodd's flock. I breathed him greeting, and the question of his captain's whereabouts. He roared disgust, spurned the air like a saddlemount rearing, and shrilled at me:

"Unpluck thine unclean, swarming thought from out my brainflesh!" Even his Crawbag scurrilities, Thief, are nimbused with nostalgia for me now! They were gamesome, you see, great buffoons, these 'bags. "Are we," he screeched, "to have no peaceful retreat left to us? Avaunt, ye Crookleg vermin! That said, Old Shaggy, I'll do my proper post, and will convey your advent to venerable Urmodd." He turned his head and roared still louder, "Urmodd! A hair-bug of uncommon hugeness would have speech with thee!"

"Admit him to the chambers," came a farther cry above.

I climbed on without answer. Foul-beaked though they always were, there was a new level of recklessness in these bags' badinage, a new level of fearlessness of myself and a strange furious mirth. These Crawbags, I realized, knew something that I did not yet know.

From the clifftop I saw the land everywhere rolling away under the seamless gray cloudrack. If the stars were hidden tonight, the world might

go half mad with doubt and wonder before dawn.

"Welcome, O agile colossus!"

This was Grey Urmodd, on the next islet of broken clifftop, a higher more prow-like stone eminence. He was idling by one of the curing frames, plucking morsels from a bloated 'dank pup. "We're to be neighbors it seems," smiled Urmodd with a gesture at our situations.

Then visit me, Urmodd; I would pay thee much for certain answers.

Urmodd ambled over to the chasm between us. His silence was full of that thing which I did not yet know. There was a whimsy on him. All of them, slouched on their perches, showed not the least awe of myself. It frightened me not a little . . . disoriented me. They seemed like beings just awakened in a world unknown to them, trying to *remember* the fear my dire visage had once roused in them.

"But why dost *thou* not visit *me*?" jollied Urmodd. "Doubt not your welcome here! Leap over now! Can you? Perhaps it is too far?"

A wager then? My answers without cost if I do leap?

"Bravely spoken! Any odds my friends? Who'll lay me. . . ."

In the midst of their jollity I sprang—they had looked for some slight tautening at least, some little flexing of preparation, but in one instant I was airborne, amidst them in the next, and they exploding all directions skywards.

Except for Urmodd, whom I had jailed within my legs, and had pinned to the stone with one fang—so delicately! Piercing him not quite, but denting his flesh teasingly, testingly, the effusion of my venom but a twitch shy of flooding him.

Jest with me, wilt thou, thou jury-rigged vermin? Thou grotesque contrivance, thou fly-blown carrion bat?

For these Crawbags were like many of those solar refugees, who, wave on wave, from world to world had fled before our ruddy sun's tumescence, and ended here. Such refugees came carrying a mad, broken baggage of fragmentary technologies. From these they had here unpacked a quaint, pitiful array of strategies to survive, which meant primarily to evade my race's fangs—for these immigrants fell like a feast before us.

And Urmodd here, seen so close, plainly displayed the signs of his body's co-tenant, the Gorgon-fly which all Crawbags contained at birth, and which grew along with its host to snugly enveloped adulthood. This insect's mouthparts extruded—discreetly—from an opening in Urmodd's throat (for the Gorgon-fly too fed on carrion, of which Urmodd conveyed as many titbits to his throathole as to his own lips), while from Urmodd's hairy brow a black pimpling of the insect's eyebuds peeped from amid the follicles. The Gorgon-fly's contributions to its host were largely invisible from without—its chitinous struts and cross braces, interlaced with the Crawbag's natural skeleton, gave Urmodd's wings their mighty span and power.

"Do you mock our allegiance with the Gorgon-fly, great A'Rak?" Urmodd's calm galled me. How I wanted whatever it was he knew! "We lesser beings must still contrive to lead our little lives, great one! Your own primordial might and purity of form could only be admired, never matched by refugees such as we! But I believe you have come to learn if we have seen more of the awesome unquiet in the sky. Is it not so?"

It is. If you have somewhat to answer, you may purchase your life with it.

"I have somewhat to answer—more than you dream of. But my release must precede the answering. If this suits you not, devour me and have done."

I released him. From his indifference, I possessed already the essence of his answer. I released him and humbly awaited his response, which he, taking wing, gave me from the air.

"You cannot fly above these clouds, as we have done. But from on high we have seen that the rack has dissipated along the shore. Haste down to

Clatterstone Strand, then, and view the heavens, and you will have your answer."

They were all on the wing now, past reaching. I cursed them for their contemptuous dismissal, but oceanwards the cloudrack did indeed seem to be breaking up. The planetbone itself felt ever more alive beneath my tarsal claws. Whatever was a-borning here was coming fast. I wheeled and plunged back down the way I'd come.

A'RAK II

I hastened back down the cragface, and back the way I had come, save that as I neared the coast, I wasted no time following streamcourses and other low ground, for rumors were already sweeping inland from the shoreside, and highway and hillside alike were thronged with hordes hastening seawards, just as I was doing, to view the unfolding in our heavens.

Eerie it was to run with every species of my prey hastening on all sides of me, the throng of them regarding my overlooming presence less and less as the influx of rumor wild-fired through the host and drew us all forward in ever hotter haste.

Our grand stampede attained the crest of the last range of hills before the sea, and there the vast host of us paused, and ran no more, but foamed and eddied in a frenzied, clamorous standstill, like surf against a seawall. Over the ocean before us, a rising wind was scouring the last wisps of cloud-ceiling from the sky, and we beheld the sun.

Still it rives my heart! The mere recollection of that sight holds still a little death for my heart! Our sun, that roseate orb, just risen clear of the horizon, was bleeding to death before her planet's stunned gaze! From her upper rim a thick, pink ribbon of her substance rivered off her circumference. In a gracefully undulant banner, this broad stream of sun-stuff arched up and plunged behind our rubicund mother-star into the just-glimpsed maw of the monster that was devouring her!

Through our sky's rosy canopy we could just make out the monster, as one in an illumined room, peering at windows interiorly lit, can just make out a shape in the darkness beyond the glass. For above and behind our sun was an even greater disk than hers, a vortex whose rim was a white blaze fed by our sun's off-streaming matter. Her radiant blood, rivering back, was snatched into this vortex's incandescent whirl, flaring briefly round its rim, to vanish in the dark nullity it enclosed!

A sun-sucking whirlpool! Arthro-Pan'doloron and her sun, with countless other suns, was being swallowed into the whirling maw of the Galactivore!** [[see editor's note at chapter's end—Shag Margold]]

Our very sun in bloody tatters torn, devoured—with the sanguinary welter of her cosmic slaughter staining half our heavens! What wonder that we, her myriad doomed spawn, did as we did?

Myself this madness seized like earthquake: a volcanic imperative to feed, feed, *feed*. My lifeblood—I comprehend it now—surged tidally to race towards annihilation's farther shore. I must grow to budding size, I must breed, my self must shed its smaller selves in myriads; my utter cancellation, writ gigantic in the empurpled zenith, must thus itself be cancelled! This mad illogic lifted me; with tenfold speed and strength I whirled about me, and slew, and slew, and slew!

And all other races of a predatory make were likewise enflamed at once. Discretion, stealth or temporary truce were all alike cast to the winds, and all across the hills, and up and down the swarming shingle, cries of onslaught chorused with the shrill replies of mortal pain. Barbed beak and talon, rasping maw and sucking fang—all sank to their red work!

Nor were the races of the preyed-upon in flight. These wall-raising, weapon-bearing ones seemed fired with a madness like the carnivores' frenzy—theirs not a fury to feed, but to slay Death, as if, by killing such killers as their blades could cut, they might together kill that Death in the sky, which none of us could touch. I saw marvels on that mad morning! I saw farming folk with torches and pruning hooks overwhelm, butcher and burn A'Raks of a stature not far short of my own. Huge-muscled Snerrls big as cottages stormed in from the tundras and ravened up all smaller fry, till the Glasques—dwarfish viticulturists of the coastal hills—joined forces with Kin-Kozm's artillery, and the ballistas hurled flaming wine-casks filled with oil to ignite the brutes' shaggy pelts, soprano-ing their warcries up to death-shrieks. . . .

How long was my world plunged in war with itself, like a monster knotted in the agony of feasting on its own entrails? Our bleeding sun, backed by the maw consuming her, had half sunk to her setting, her last setting!—when I was torn from my feeding frenzy by a stroke of awe that pierced me through. I crouched—unwieldy with the bulging of my engorged abdomen—and harkened to a high, keen note I heard faintly—faintly!—approaching the vast melee from afar.

I have told you, Thief, of the demon who—alone in my cosmos—made prey of my kind. This monstrous she-demon was monarch of our skies when, at long intervals, she took wing to hunt us. She came when she had marked among us a victim grand enough to house her egg. Thus housed—horrible to relate—her offspring hatched and ate her frozen, living lodgement hollow! And it was traditionally said of her comings that, when she came, that a'rak among us she had particularly marked for her quarry would hear the whine of her advent with a particular clarity, even as I heard it now.

Thus, at a stroke, did I learn that now, as my world died, the demon had come for a last meal upon my kind, and I was the meal she had chosen.

Here was I, greatest of a'rak kind in the South-East Seas—chosen now. For of course, must not the demon feel at our sun's death that same imperative that frenzied us all?

I fled as madly as a hundred thousand prey had futilely fled before me in my time. I was grossly swollen and unwieldy with my delirious feasting, but I summoned desperation's strength, and fled to the nearest vent, and down into the chasm-coombs.

I dove deep in the world-bone's embrace, my natural solace. It was mere desperation. I knew full well what would ensue long before I'd reached the Sunless Sea. Already the shrill, razor-keen song of Pam'Pel's wings began to resonate in the subterranean maze behind me, following fast, and following faster.

Her wingsong by itself stabbed me with a mortal pain; it engendered a deep vibration that made the stone's least touch a torment to my flesh. Will-less, nigh mindless, I fled as on flaming claws, striving to reach the Sunless Sea, knowing I would fail.

She overtook me in a mighty-vaulted chamber. What use rehearse my helpless wardings, feints, and counter-strokes? Had I then but the might and mass I now possess, our battle would surely have had a different issue—as, if indeed she comes again, it will have now! In that encounter, as my world was seized by the galactic predator, so I was seized by Pam'Pel, and because I was slain, I was saved, as you shall hear. At that moment, of course, I knew only my death, saw her eyes already devouring me when her stinger struck me. That icy fang, flame-quick, yet seemed an eternity piercing me! Icy paralysis gripped all my parts. My body became inert, the bulky coffin of my limbless terror. She seized me and began to drag me to her . . . nursery chamber.

And where was this? Why, she dragged me down to the very refuge I had been trying to reach! Down to the marge of the Sunless Sea she dragged me. I grasped this as she dragged me deeper and deeper down through the chasm-coombs. And indeed, where more natural to flee a monster in the heavens, than in one's world's bowels?

By the time we came down at last to the shore of the Sunless Sea, even in my numbness I felt the world-bone wailing and booming about us, and saw the massy waters, lurid-litten in fungal phosphoresence, heaving and dancing like mad mountains. High up on the quivering strand she laid me, her venom my infallible bondage upon me, and went to work. With her dire, black jaws she began to chew great blocks of bedrock out of the strand.

Only the vast dim feverlight of the Sea breathed faint form upon the towering vaults of our racked world. Pam'Pel's implacable jaws and her caustic spittle crushed metallic seams from the stone. She was, I grasped, when its bottom and two of its sides were laid, constructing a great sarcophagus of Arthro-Pan'doloron's bedrock. Her race were always diggers

of tombs for my race, and though she'd chosen this far deeper, fore-made sepulcher, her delver's powers she still employed.

And I grasped it all soon enough, helplessly watching her toils while the planet's foundations groaned and fretted around us, creaking and shuddering towards the last like an old ship's timbers in a destroying sea: this vast casket was for me. She had not yet implanted me, the which she could do mortally quick, in her desperation to make a vessel for me and her brood within me—a vessel to seal out, if possible, the Cataclysm descending.

And as the planet cracked and spasmed and splintered around us, it dawned on me that the terror of this commotion involved no feeling of an imminent collapse, of burial in *fallen* rock.

No! The terror was the feeling that the world foundation was pulling away from us. It was a feeling of imminent explosion, of floor and wall and ceiling straining to flee us, to fly suddenly asunder and leave us floating naked in a Void. . . .

Madly she toiled on my coffin. The fury of her extinction-defying gambit was a thing of awe. She had the huge casket fashioned; she gnawed out the massy lid to seal it. Once she had me armor-shod, she would implant me with lightning strokes, willing only then to release her precious eggs naked into my fortressed flesh.

And in this her blind bid to fox our world's fate—in this, Thief, lay my salvation! Bare seconds too late was Pam'Pel! Bare seconds unbound me from the sure death she had all but shackled to me!

She laid me in my massy box, half-hinged its lid in place—all while the Sunless Sea towered up in glowering peaks, and the planet convulsed. Then she mounted, faltering in the growing turbulence—mounted then the coffin, and drew up her gaster to empierce my abdomen.

And just then, with a howl that came abruptly to an utter silence, sea and bedrock exploded everywhere away at once—stone to sand and water to flashing fog, both like dense smoke snaked spiralling away in all directions,

and we were plunging, plunging, through an utter blackness, an utter silence, an utter cold.

What can I say of Time in what ensued?! Long, and long, and long, I was, and I fell, and I saw not.

Eons later, still I fell, but suddenly, in all directions, there were stars.

They were no stars I recognized, and were more thinly strewn than those that roofed the nights of Arthro-Pan'doloron, but stars they were, and their light relieved at last the nothingness! And here was my coffin round me, lid wide ajar, slowly tumbling in the starshine, and in this tumbling I came round, and round again, and knew a terror that shook me deeper than any I have told thee yet.

Just behind me—gaster advanced, her vast eyes looming—Pam'Pel closely pursued me.

In a frozen pursuit, I realized. I saw I was one piece of a cloud of debris that fell together, and that just behind me, slowly tumbling in time to my tumble, her useless wings as frozen as my limbs, the demon hung dead, or dead-seeming, her eyes unknowing as black ice. . . .

Time ground mutely on. The starfield—ah so gradually!—altered. And, just as gradually, one particular star—towards which we seemed to fall—grew brighter than the rest.

Our long descent toward your world I will not recount. Its little gold coin of a sun seemed a stingy affair (could it be the model of your race's odd lust for minted gold?) but I gave less thought to this azure orb than I did to my condition once aground here, for I did not doubt I could prevail and prosper here, had I but movement, and my limbs' free use.

And this—oh miracle on miracle!—I began to regain! Never before had the demon's paralytic been put to such a test of time! At last, I began to outwear it.

Indeed, it was a close thing at the last, as if this whole chain of wonders that had brought me here had been precisely clocked, each marvel to dovetail snugly and precisely with the next. My forelegs and my palps first thawed —little by little, but each awakening tingle rang a mighty peal of hope within my soul! Our stately drift toward this world became a plunge, even as my hind limbs thawed, and stirred, and answered my will at last!

Even as we plunged in our swarm of broken stone, diving towards the melting continents of cloud that sheathe this globe, even as the orb grew vast, obliterating every other sight, I had nestled in my coffin, and drawn the lid shut, manipulating it like a crude vessel, captaining at last what I had so long lain in like a living corpse.

A murderous heat briefly enveloped me; then a steaming, thunderous impact stunned me—I sank through water, fathoms of steaming, bubbling brine. Cold silt boiled up around our final resting place, and slowly settled back down around us, and still more slowly, stunned, I crawled from my crypt and beheld my new condition.

Here was Pam'Pel's lifeless form amid the trans-stellar debris, those few paltry remnant pebbles of our devoured cosmos! On my would-be murderess' corpse I threw myself. I tore her limbs and broke her body. When at length I turned away, I left her—I *know* I left her—dead, a carcass forever void of life!

How strange it is, this passion that has filled me to impart my past to thee, O Thief! Of my doings here I feel no urge to tell thee—they are recorded, amply enough, here and there among thy kind!

The passion was pity, in part, I think! Pity for my vanished world! How odd, how comically poignant, seem I now to myself, Oh Thief! To have made this urgent confession of my poor world's death—to have in whispering haste entrusted the whole gigantic tragedy to *thine* ear. To have thrust so huge a fact upon the paltry witness of an ephemeral nothing like thyself!

And yet how strangely it pleases me to have done so, to have murmured this Muchness in a dust-mite's ear! It amuses me to take this ironic precaution against Extinction's grand irony, and bequeath the whole treasure of my world's long glory to the leaky, shallow vessel of thine understanding.

Meanwhile let the precaution's slightness declare my confidence. However and in what state the demon has survived, her kind have never faced an a'rak of half my might, for kindly Hagia's safety and rich pastures have nourished me far past her species' ken.

Meanwhile if the long odds fall, I am provided for. Speak my tale, then, Thief, among thy fellows. Mayhap it might live on a day or so among such windblown Nothings as thou art!

Withdraw now. Thaw out the priest with wine. He'll pay thee, and perhaps thou'lt assist him with thy footpad's suavities in this day's great business of golden donative! Farewell, Thief.

[[Editor's Note:

The entity Galactivore, if entity it be, is but scantly attested to in any document that my personal researches have uncovered. The immortal Parple, of course, among his *Pandects*, has bequeathed us his rendering of the High Archaic fragment *Galactivore Imperator*, and the careful reader will detect in those verses a being or agency not unlike that glimpsed by the spidergod at his world's extinction. I here supply a copy of the lines for the reader's convenience.

—Shag Margold]]

* * *

Galactivore Imperator

Galactivore Imperator
A wheel of suns to tatters tore

And at one stroke, its denizens
drave from their earthen tenements

These denizens were myriad
un-wombed from loins unwearied

all their host a-marching came
from chaos toward the beckoning flame,

All sparked to life by starry fire,
Some were dainty, some were dire,

all were random, none were pointless
bent on being, gargoyles dauntless

each clung to its borrowed stuff
until their flesh was vortexed off

their borrowed stuff was repossessed
their every shape at once unfleshed

(Their shapes survive one nano-tick
like candleflames without the wicks!

The pure design hangs there a blink
before it back to Nothing sinks!)

Hail mad contrivance, yeasty dust!
Winged, finned, footed, on ye thrust!

Contraptions! pushing snout, maw, muzzle,
each in its bit of the puzzle.

Eyed antennaed, tongued and fingered,
Barb'd, tusk'd, horn'd, claw'd, fang'd and stingered. . . .

For those black millstones, Null and Void
reclaim all dust in lives deployed.

(Woe that lives should coalesce!
Woe that dust should effervesce!)

Grind them out and grind them back,
to dust a-vortexing in black:
Tyrant ghouls and martyrs crimeless!
Genocides and saviors timeless!

Grind out gallows bravely mounted
dungeoned innocents uncounted
Implacably all dust reclaim
that found a shape, a wish, a name.

Those black millstones, Void and Null,
grind the thoughts from every skull.

grind out stars, then grind them back
to dust a-vortexing in black . . .
Grind out sinewed wings a-winging
grind out corded throats a-singing
grind out gembright brimming eyes
and ardent tongues in colloquies
and hearts engorged with little hoards
of suns and moons, of touches, words . . .
grind them out and grind them back
to dust a-vortexing in black. . . .

((Ye ghostly hordes of lives that were
in starry cauldrons once a-stir
even echoes now ye lack
in the unreporting black

that reclaimed ye once again
when your spirits had their spin . . .))

Oh have mercy, Void and Null!
That is empty which was full!

Grind out abysses overleapt,
grim peaks conquered, death-vows kept,
grind out mourner and bewept
grind out deeds, and deeps they dare,
heroes and the hells they harrow
grind out plague and wondrous cure
ambition's bow and conquest's arrow
Saints and torments they endure. . . .

NIFFT IX

The spidergod's donative, indemnifying the cruel tax taken at the Choosing, was sited in Keelyard Square, an extensive plaza, and the largest such that this city afforded, so thronged with its proud towers and swelling vaults and domes was Big Quay, where a hundred great bonding and banking concerns jostled for architectural preeminence.

I'd helped Paanja Pandagon to his quarters, given him wine, and left him sleeping, with promises to come and wake him in the second hour after sunrise. I walked the predawn streets. The streets themselves were empty, but lamps burned everywhere behind the curtained windows, and the rumor of free gold, to be dispensed mere hours from now, raged like a fever through those muffled hearthside conversations.

At the Fobb and Weskitt I bespoke a hot breakfast posset and sweet wine, and the man who served me, though courteous enough, seemed dazed, in a dreamy suspension between greed and apprehension, and I guessed his state to be typical of many of his fellow citizens' condition this morning.

Having breakfasted, I bethought me of a much-needed bath, but after a moment's thought I instantly rejected the notion. I returned to the streets instead, for, battered and exhausted as I was, sleep would have been impossible for me.

As the sun came up, I wound my way to Keelyard Square, and reached it as the first flood of light spilled across it. The beginnings of a multitude were already gathering round the perimeter of the square. An inner perimeter of Bailiffs and Reeves and some few of Pandagon's mercenaries stood tranquilly and chatted with the folk they fenced from the center of the plaza. And there in the center, on three dozen open freight wagons drawn up side by side, was a most terrifying sight.

I refer, of course, to the great naked heaps of gold coin, with, embedded in them, great open casks and bags of more gold coin, all vomiting brightly

out to join the golden spill of ruddy wealth. A miniature mountain range of gold crested those big wagons. I am sure you have grasped, Shag, the kind of terror they caused me. When bait is so flagrantly strewn as this, look up sharp, for the trap's practically a-falling on you already!

And all those watching folk felt a bit of this too, I think. It was less clear in their minds because their hearts were half-purchased already by this blatant pelf, but the buried doubt showed in their quiet, in the absence of tension round the perimeter formed by the Bailiffs and their men. There was nothing restive about the steadily growing crowd. There was a cautious patience about them, rather, a tentativeness that was listening as it approached the lure. All that naked gold! No one can know it like a thief, old friend—when it's shown that crassly, you can bet that it will cost you your life to try actually getting away with any of it.

I longed to go up to the Stadium and find Mav already there with even a few score tough highlanders under arms, but she would never have reached it this soon. And though we might stretch hope so far as to expect Fursten Minim, down-coast acquiring titanoplod cohorts and pikemen, to return by late in the day, we could look for no backing from that quarter any sooner. The sky was an utterly cloudless blue—I never saw a more splendidly candid sky, and it seemed to me swollen to bursting with mortal danger.

I went back and woke Pandagon as I'd promised, and I followed him and his sacerdotal staff at full muster back to the square. I listened with the now fully assembled multitude to his ringing introduction of the rite. As a bit of priestly drama, the spidergod could not have faulted it, nor doubted his loyalty. The Ecclesiarch declared that this great public gift expressed the god's love, and his grief for the lives his dire necessity had compelled him to consume at the Choosing, and his present resolve to stand in their defence against the dread Enemy that might menace Hagia's frontier in the not distant future.

This sparked a somewhat stronger buzz of conversation in the multitude, and yet still their voices had a dazed and murmurous quality. Then the largesse commenced. The citizens moved forward in parallel files, carrying

their own receptacles. In each, the priests cast a quart scoop of fine gold coin.

Gold dealt by the scoop like dry beans! I won't deny the glorious audacity of that bit of theater. The A'Rak was a wily old alien after all. There is an answering lust awakened by the sight of so much raw gold, and it cannot be suppressed entirely. Besides this mesmeric effect, the crowd was further lulled to see trestles being set up in preparation for the great banquet to follow the donative—such homely preparations of ale-kegs and bread baskets are irresistibly calmative.

But my fear came back soon enough—my fear of that empty blue sky, and my fear of the crags that towered like a rear wall to Big Quay, crowding the city up against the river. Just how many spiders might suddenly scuttle out of those crags, and pour in a thorny cascade through every boulevard and alley and lane? My legs refused to be still, so I slipped out of the square. Inevitably, loathing the sight of the crags, I trended riverwards in my rambling.

What madness! To stand so placid as those crowds did to accept their golden bribe! If it weren't that I had two allies vaguely due here under arms, and now had the Ecclesiarch's facade of collaboration to support, it would have seemed an excellent stratagem for me to defy the dockside impoundment of all moored craft, unmoor some handy vessel, and await my friends offshore at least.

In this mood, my walk quickly became a canvassing for secure retreats from the doom I sensed impended. I soon determined that the great quayside rank of warehouses—their high roofs broad and parapeted—were an ideal site to stand siege, and one to which a very large portion of the crowd I had just seen in Keelyard Square, might safely recoil, and find space in which to mount a serious defence.

That long archipelago of rooftops, fronting the quay as it did, was most promising in other ways too, I noted. Look at all these cargo booms right down on quayside—on wheeled, plod-drawn platforms. Look too at what

could be hoisted right up to those rooftops: casks of Kairnish sap, and glabrous oil in tuns, and Bellagravian Brandies there in pyramided casks! All marvellous flammables! And those pavingstones heaped there for re-flagging the quay! Excellent missiles for smashing eye-knobs! And was that not mast stock there in that naval supply yard? Dressed poles bound in faggots of twenty for quick hoisting? What perfect sarissas and thrusting lances, scaled to suit our enemy, if handled by pairs or trios of defenders!

To be standing down here on Big Quay's streets, trapped in narrow channels among her buildings, how foolhardy! Hunting spawn, fleet as cats and big as chariots, could scour these streets bare of human flesh in one irresistible sweep. Every nerve of me was on fire to get on high ground if I had to stay in this city and here, along Warehouse Row, was a situation I could make secure with just a handful of able men and women.

But it is an odd catch in human nature, that mere awkwardness and embarrassment can deflect us even from measures that might save our lives. How undignified I should look taking the role of one whom an odd panic has seized, and going to the Ecclesiarch for a detachment of men to begin craning casks of oil and crates of paving stones and bundles of mast stock up onto the rooftops of Warehouse Row!

Well then, let Big Quay be damned. Come the dreaded ambush, I would take to the river. I'd lately learned how a vessel could be a floating fort against the relative ineptitude of surface-swimming spawn.

So down to the nearest small craft slips I went for a boat to unmoor and discreetly set ready. The Quayside was deserted. The crews held in port by the A'Rak's moratorium on water traffic had been summoned to receive a "guest" donative decreed for foreigners by the beneficent deity, and then to be given choice seats at the following banquet.

I saw an old wherry with one of the warehouse's rune on it, a service vessel for maintenance of the dock. Nearby at the base of the Quay's wall was the grated mouth of a big drain whence the city streets' drainage entered the

river. I could row the wherry to the grate and moor it there, out of sight from the quayside above.

I reached the wherry still unobserved. Indeed, no shipping had yet heaved in sight from downriver today. Surely this was unusual—the wind had long turned upriver. I slipped the wherry's painter from the bollard and stepped in, tripping slightly as I did so.

The water beneath me felt wrong. It lacked give. The wherry didn't settle into it under my weight, as if the hull were entangled in something just under water. I jumped up and down and there was still no give. Then I tripped again.

And here, when I knelt down to it, was a strand of almost invisible webbing crossing the gunnels. This wasn't the ghost-silk material, but a very tough, almost perfectly transparent filament. My exploring hands weren't long in learning that the whole underside of the boat was thickly netted in these strands and lashed to the dock with them.

There followed some frantic verifications of the situation that had already dawned on me: every boat I tried, and surely every craft moored in Big Quay, was clandestinely ensnared at its anchorage.

The scale of this sly maneuver, and its plain purpose, were equally terrifying. Utterly gone was any scruple about seeming ludicrous. I returned on winged feet to Keelyard Square. How the crowd filled it, folk close-standing as the stalks of the wheat in the field! A broad acreage of boards and trestles were heaped with smoking food, and up and down the aisles of it the folk rivered, filling their platters and pannikins. At the table for Notables, Pandagon had taken up the central station. He picked me out of the dense crowd at quite a distance—perhaps it was something showing in my face that stood me out. I was certainly the only man in Big Quay who knew what I knew. He got up and advanced to meet me, displaying smiles and courtesies to those he moved among.

I was blank-faced and brief: every ship in the docks was webbed fast to its moorage, and not a single vessel had come up the river all morning.

I was on my way in moments with two Bailiffs and eight Reeves at my back, and a larger party shortly to follow. We had not yet threaded our way out of the square before Pandagon, on a pretext murmured to the functionaries flanking him, had made his exit in another direction. Once out of public view, he summoned an escort of his mercenaries and led them post haste by the south trail from the Crags. If Minim had yet returned with his forces to their prearranged rendezvous downriver at Hyssop's Bight, it was plainly time, and past time, to have his muster brought up to the city.

The biggest cargo cranes the quayside afforded took three men on each handle of the geared crank. The thinner of my Bailiffs, Samption, was a plain-spoken man who led by doing, and he got his countrymen (they were all a soberer than usual lot since the Choosing) smartly to work on trundling the wheeled hoists to the side of our chosen warehouse, which had the greatest concentration of timbers and mast stock near it on the Quayside. "Do I rightly understand," he asked me, "that we are going to construct fortifications up topside there, to hold against the A'Rak's . . . enemies? And that these enemies are expected soon to arrive?"

I could not speak candidly. These men had their families, their everything here. If I told them the truth they would run to their wives and their children with it, and I desperately needed them to help secure a refuge here to which those wives and children could be brought while there was still time.

"Few doubt the enemy's coming," I told him, "but its form is unknown. Since we must establish some footing against its coming, we are gambling that high ground which also commands the line of the river will be useful against it."

"Well, spit for luck, and let's set to," said Samption.

Bundled mast stock and wire-netted half-tons of paving stones we hoisted up to the roof, load after load of them. Shortly there joined us another score of the local constabulary, dispatched by Pandagon from their perimeter post when he passed it going south. With Samption showing them the tricks of it, these men got two more cranes hoisting goods to the roof of our

neighboring warehouse on the north. More masts, more stones, tuns and casks of sap and brandy and other flammables swung upwards through the morning sunshine. The whirr of our crane cranks and the soft clatter of the slings touching down on the rooftiles sounded almost loud in the Quay's vast emptiness and silence, while, for all our grim diligence, the work had the most ludicrous appearance imaginable. To an unprepared witness our endeavor must have seemed the grotesque error of a horde of solemn lunatics, madmen who had found the Quay deserted, usurped its business, and set to doing its work wildly awry. Here they were stowing cargo like real longshoremen—but on *top* of the warehouses instead of inside them. Surely at any moment some properly constituted citizen of this town would step out of the silent streets, and tactfully set us right. . . .

But he failed to appear, and, as was inevitable if unchecked, we madmen extended our folly. We set a crew to stacking supply-heaps of stones and flammables at intervals along the balustrade, set others to putting crude points on the mast-blanks with framer's axes, and malleted logger's spikes into the butts of said masts for grips. We lashed masts side to side in five-mast widths and laid these as footbridges between the neighboring rooftops. The wood was tough Kolodrian Gnarl-cone, creaky but firm as we lightfooted across the eight-story chasms between our fortresses.

"Why, you can see right into Keelyard from here," marvelled Samption mildly, for from one corner of the northerly warehouse a gap in the intervening buildings allowed us to look straight on to one of the corners of the mile-distant square, along a broad boulevard that crossed the square on the diagonal. What showed of the plaza was a sea of folk, though at the center, the empty freight wagons still had some sacred space around them. In that morning's clarity the wagons seemed a group of child's toys, their freight-wells little black pits of shadow now, the golden dunes melted away.

"They're still feasting—see the trestles there? Still packed with folk forking it," said a Reeve.

"Folk drinking now too," said Samption. "Such a delicious bitter ale—and so many kegs of it!" There was a detectable unease now in the stolid

Bailiff's voice. The man was seeing just what a box his fellow citizens had all packed themselves into.

"Mark you," I offered, indicating the street right below our perch, "how we might bridge this lane—"

"Cavil Crossing."

"How we might span Cavil, right over to that solarium's balcony there, while the next street inward—"

"Lesser Cavil."

"—looks to be as readily spanned as this one. We have to provide all possible means for maneuver here, my friends. We need to run stout catwalk as many ways out as we can, and *quick*—to any other buildings that can get us safe down to the street. We want ways to bring our friends up here and to get ourselves down. Some of us should start lashing five-mast widths of rampway and others start laying it. I have a flair for rooftop travel. Help me lodge this section on the balcony, Samption, and let's cross Cavil, and see what other buildings we can get into."

"Better to bridge to that gutter on the next house, which has a bakery on the street floor for provisions, and has one of the armories of the district constabulary on the second floor."

"Good! Choose our path for us, with just such considerations in mind."

We laid a double span across Cavil, and ran catwalk to a balconied window, which we prised out in the name of civic necessity. We left other men to go into the house and establish the route down to the street, and these men found a goodly number of people staying quietly withindoors and much troubled by the intrusion, until they were assured of a grave emergency facing the state—and this they seemed well able to accept, and stayed hiding within. We pushed walkway across Lesser Cavil and then bridged the next street, Wharfside. In the block thus attained, we could descend through the buildings down to Navvy Common, a major commercial

thoroughfare transecting the city on a parallel with the river. Here some kind of deployment of troops could be made—a pitched battle fought.

We branched out our aerial path, catwalking along cornices and ridges, creaking back and forth across the voids of the streets. Meanwhile some of our number, acting on their own hook, were discreetly bringing back colleagues and friends, such that within two hours we numbered nigh two hundred, and had a third warehouse roof joined by bridges and provisioned.

Still we had not yet half enough men and women to hold our rooftops against any strong attack, so Samption and I designated a deputation of judicious men and women and sent them to circulate through Keelyard Square for a more concerted drawing off of allies for our work here. With a sufficient force for defense now, we could begin assembling the defenceless for safety, with a surplus of the able for an expeditionary force to launch attacks out along Navvy Commons.

Through all this, nothing specific was voiced in my hearing, but at some point it became clear that not one of these men and women believed for a moment that it was really the A'Rak's *enemy* that we were all working so furiously to prepare against.

As we waited for the people to start streaming back to us in earnest, I began to feel a crushing sense of danger's imminence. I set myself to helping tie tow round the heads of arrows, and dip them in pitch. I was feeling a kind of pressure behind my eyes, and a prickliness of the nerves as I worked, as if a kind of sharp, invisible sleet filled the air. Most of us were on the rooftops, with a few still down on the dockside working the cranes, and I noticed in everyone else's movements a vagueness and distraction, as if they too were troubled by this curious sensation.

In my restlessness I went to the riverside parapet and studied the broad, empty flux of the Haagsford. How could it be that still not a sail, not even a rowboat, dotted the open water of this, one of the great highways of southern trade?

My eyes were drawn inland to the distant Square—hadn't I caught some slight, strange movement about its periphery? By the Crack, yes! For there it was again, among the rooftops surrounding the square: something dark darting quick across a cornice, a little to quick for me to make out. . . .

It was then that I heard, behind me, a vast, ripply whisper of water. I spun and looked down, saw the river's edge buckle and swell along the whole length of the quay at once, and saw erupt from it—in a burst of bright spray—a thorny black wave of A'Rakspawn.

They surged up onto the Quay's whole width at once, hair-raising in their sheer vast number! The people working the hoists got not even one full scream out before they were jailed within bristly legs and fanged with a brutally destructive finality. So huge a gout of venom was discharged with these annihilating strokes, that the victims ballooned up grotesquely with the corrosive infusion, which ate its way through to the outer flesh in a half dozen bulges; they were sucked dry with equal suddenness, while the main spider-wave had seethed and scuttled away, streaming into the city up every street and lane and alleyway.

We on the rooftop, crouching low and as mute as terror could make us, rushed to the inland edge of the roof and peeked over. The invasion filled Cavil, already boiling in every street we had a glimpse of. With their fangs they tried and tore open every door, some rushing through each while the main body poured unstoppably uptown, whither our vista already revealed to us a general convergence of the host towards Keelyard Square.

Such a host, and yet so silent! There were muffled screams from the stay-at-homes they had found in the houses, but in the main their seething progress made only a muted hailstorm sound of claws on stone, a soft boil of clicks that plainly did not carry far ahead of the host, for still, in the distant square, the folk could be seen serenely feasting.

Now though, on the rooftops around the square, the dark shapes of spawn scuttled everywhere. We on our rooftops felt precisely that quality of paralysis that is Nightmare itself, watching the spider-seethe like a black

surf scour through the streets below us, the whole tide of them contracting toward the focus of Keelyard Square, its own roofs aswarm with a tightening girdle of death—and yet we, withal, so completely voiceless, lest we draw some of that tide up against ourselves!

We stood not long in this helpless horror. For, from those swarming rooftops round the square, bright sprays of brilliance suddenly leapt out, to dazzle in the morning light above the feasting multitude. You could almost make out the upward tilting of forty thousand faces beholding that dazzlement, and could just hear their vast murmur of surprise—for still the muted hailstorm of claws on stone, yet a few streets distant, went unheard by them.

But now, at last, fear rippled violently through the human host, as those bright outflung sprays of ghostweb fell on them and seized their limbs in crushing bondage.

Round the square's whole perimeter the webbing fell, tangling the host's whole periphery into a struggling, squirming barrier that contained all the rest of the multitude. Even then, from the rooftops, the spawn themselves leapt out, diving into the pool of their prey, while, a moment after, in through all four corners of the square, the phalanxed spiders from the river poured.

A sea of terrified humanity swirled beneath a boil of spiders furiously feeding. Not quite yet had terror's limit been attained, however. Not until the A'Rak himself rose into view from behind the buildings along the plaza's northern side, and stepped over that block of buildings, and down into the square itself to wade amidst the slaughter.

When we beheld old Grandsire himself, we understood that invisible sleet that stung our nerves, for now it grew to a painfully shrill storm. It was the A'Rak's thought: not an intelligible utterance now, but a piercing, mindless imperative which absolutely commanded the wills of his countless sons, and which drove them as irresistibly as the wind drives chaff. From the father flowed a current of compulsion which pulled the sea of his spawn

into a foaming swirl toward his center. They poured into the square from all sides and slew and slew and slew, scything the multitude (now their screams reached us clarion-clear!) with their plunging fangs, and gorging with gluttonous suction on the liquefied flesh of their kills.

And as the spawn fanged and fed, growing swollen with their food, on *them* did their huge sire fall and feed. The human food, too picayune for his huge fangs, he drave his sons to gather, and then upon their ampler frames himself did feast!

"We must save who we can!" the cry rose among us—from my lips? From everyone's? Our wills were as firmly welded as terror and loathing could bind them in one common purpose. Spawn still fleetly scavenged through the streets of the city at large, but now in pairs and triplets they could be encountered and slain, which we burned to do.

Samption and I led off the column. Along our catwalk path we streamed and down to Navvy Common, into which we plunged with a muster of half a dozen mast-spears in the lead. The first spawn that reared up to strike us we speared under the jaws and held propped while a score of us surrounded him and sworded his legs off for him, joint by joint, in a trice. Branching into cohorts some two-score strong, we began to clear the Commons, and as we advanced we set up the cry for those hiding withindoors to come down to us. The stay-at-homes whose dwellings had withstood the spiders' attempts at penetration proved many.

Of these, the young and the elderly we hustled back up to our fortresses. The abler added their strength to our mast-spears, and on we pressed, dodge and fight, recoil, riposte and counter-thrust—a long time it took us to come within the last few streets of Keelyard Square, but as at last we neared it, and we emerged on a broad boulevard yielding a view of the stadium in the crags above the city, we saw up on the grand promenade that climbed the crags a force of several hundred folk in arms looking down upon the city in horror. The highlanders had come through.

I took a detachment of spearmen and we sprinted towards them. They met us halfway down the broad switchbacks, and Mav stood at their head. She was pointing to Keelyard Square even before I came up to her, shouting something.

"Do you see what he means to do?" she cried when we reached them. "Look you, he means to force a moult! See how he gorges on the man-gorged spawn! He whirls them in the cyclone of his will, and makes the most swollen ones scuttle to him to be consumed. He is a maelstrom! Every jot of food spins to his maw, and see how gravely swollen he himself is already, as if his meal began to rupture him? It does, in fact! His frame is breaking there, and there! He feasts towards his own annihilation—he strives to force a moult in violation of his natural time. And if he should survive the damage of such transcending gluttony, then he *will* moult—to something surpassing what his race was fashioned to be. It is a desperate ploy—to do it he must stay fixed and pull all to his center. We can take the fight to him, and on the way free all those folk where they're sieged in their dwellings."

And our vantage from the cragface showed us our work cut out for us: wherever spawn clung to walls and tore at shuttered windows with their fangs, or recoiled from shattered doors whence pike-thrusts came, were citizens still to be liberated who might swell our forces.

Down to it we ran. Mav's highlanders did not lack spears and pikes, for such arms had they long cultivated in their militance against the A'Rak. They had broadswords as well for the leg-lopping sweeps so effective here. We merged our troops with them into units each of which was centered around two or three mast-spears, and each of these could now be managed by four handlers, much increasing the quickness of their thrusts. We grew quite adept at stabbing them—*crunch*—under the midsections of spawn, and then propping them up for the lopping off of their legs.

We were soon near a thousand strong, and closed ever faster upon the square, with refugees steadily streaming back from our lines, and up the catwalks to the fortressed rooftops, which we now had well defended with

nigh five hundred troops to hold the parapets. Now the sun approached the zenith, and so did this hellish war.

It was a war, at least, at its outskirts. At its center, I'm afraid, it was nothing more than an obscene, gargantuan feasting where a swirling spider-host sucked the flesh from a human one, and in its turn was torn by the titan jaws of the A'Rak on his mountain of husks. Now, at least, the last of the streets peripheral to the square was empty of spawn, except those we'd lopped and gutted. We came together then for a focussed assault and, gathered in phalanxes three abreast, we approached the southeast corner of the square.

We confronted one vast pool of death and alien horror. A sea of husks, human and A'Rak, filled it from wall to wall in leathery dunes. Atop this heap sat the A'Rak, monstrously swollen, his abdomen twice too huge for even his mighty legs to move, and ruptured into bulges and billows that grossly deformed its tapered spheroidicity. Around him perhaps a thousand of his sons, last of their generations, were gathered in a tight, protective formation, all arrayed fangs-out and palps high, warding us from their colossal sire, but not advancing to engage us. We halted our advance, and gazed.

"See how his eyes grow waxen," Mav said. "He's going into moult! They must now stand his defense here. Now we can draw our full muster up against him, for he cannot move from here, and they dare not desert his immediate defense.

"Burn the monster!" cried Samption, whom the carnage had whipped into a hollow-eyed, raving fury. "He crouches on a pyre ready-made. Bring the tuns of oil and spirits here from our fortresses! Cart it quick here in freight wagons. We can drench them and burn them where they crouch!"

The idea kindled an eager fire in all of us—here was an encompassable vengeance upon our enemy's hugeness!

All the plods and other draybeasts had been ravened up in that first great carnivorous wave that had rolled dripping from the river. Men and women, then, seized the yoke poles of four score freight wagons, which they hauled

in file between our fortressed rooftops, whence the recently hoisted tuns and casks of combustibles were winched back down. Once loaded, each wagon was run at a near sprint, by folk too overfilled with horror to feel it more, folk in whom wrath and grief-goaded lust for vengeance were the only passions that still burned. They rushed the wagons back to our point of attack at the southeast corner of Keelyard Square.

Our problem was the drenching of more than the mere periphery of our foe's corpse-heaped stronghold. The tactical force of spawn that skirted their immobile sire deployed to the very brink of the sea of husks he slept on, and furiously engaged any sortie we made to bear the inflammables inside the square's vast necroscape.

Pump wagons from the municipal yards were thought of, and at once assembled. But these, though designed to deal with fires in lofty structures, were poor in the actual performance. Perhaps the spiritous and oleaginous fluids that we sprayed, differing from water in density, were to blame. We were able to drench the skirt of the husk-dunes, and the van of the defenders, to a distance of some three or four rods within the square. Our fire arrows set this crescent of husks and defenders fiercely ablaze.

But the spawn then, using palps and forelegs with all the mighty leverage of siege engines, thrust the burning husks and bodies back at us, heaping them into a smoking dyke thrice a man's height and ramming this dyke outward at us, forcing our troops and wagons to fall back.

We had to wrestle the hot debris ourselves then, dragging it aside, reopening a laneway of assault. All the while the A'Rak in his bloated deformity showed a stillness that grew more ominous with each second that passed. His ranked eyes were dead, opaque, as were the barbs and bristles that furred him all over. The glint of life was utterly absent, yet movement *from within* at length began to stir his dead-looking shell. There was a slow, rippling labor within his colossal distorted abdomen, and this was soon followed by a sudden, sprouting growth affecting two of his legs, both of which began elongating crookedly.

In short, the alchemy of the god's desperate tactic appeared to be a-bubbling within his gluttony-ruptured corpse. By the time we had cleared the dyke of burning organic debris, and charged again with our pump-wagons spraying in the van, his abdomen had begun tumescing even further in asymmetric billows.

Once more our flaming arrows fell like rain and kindled furious flames, consuming perhaps half a score of spawn. Again their brothers thrust their blazing bodies forth, and drove us back before the broiling wall. We began to despair. We were killing them only by dribs and drabs, while A'Rak's forced moult was all too plainly—by the upheavals of his frame—imminent.

A ragged cheering reached us from our distant fortressed rooftops, and then louder cheers from troops posted on nearer roofs. Then behold! Here up boulevard came Paanja Pandagon and Fursten Minim at the head of fifteen hundred mercenaries with pikes and halberds, and a cohort of fourscore titanoplods shod with iron-spurred squashers!

We cheered ourselves hoarse, and made way for our new vanguard.

They had come none too soon, for even now the A'Rak's deformed immensity began to shudder and heave, then to buck titanically, sending mighty tremors through the city's foundation that drowned out even the weighty footfalls of the advancing titanoplods.

LAGADEME IX

The silk shroud's gibbous bulge would have been as white as the moon, except for the ghost-fever flashing through it. As our aerial battle continued —the globe both beacon and barrier to the convergent monsters whose leg-toil dented the silver water, and whom we left eyeless and legless to sink, fanging the empty air—the silk's delirious glow intensified to an unearthly fire, until the witch cried:

"Lo! It wheels and rolls! Is she waking, or does the ghost silk defend her?"

The globe indeed glinted with rotation, and brought up its wet underside with a monstrous spawn clinging to it and striving to thrust huge fangs through its tough integument, and just at the fangs' points of impact with the silk did the fire flash brightest.

In we swooped. We lopped off its fangs first. Still it clung, though powerless to feed, and so—with some effort due to its bigness—we lopped off its legs, the silk helping us by lifting and turning the clinging monster to present the limbs to our strokes. Meanwhile its severed fangs, left hanging from the silk, began to smoke and shrivel, till the ghost-fever had consumed them like wicks.

"Her presence wakes them to rebellion!" trumpeted Jaundyssa. "Those souls the fabric fetters—they burn and bind the spawn! They defend Pam'Pel. As she wakes, she wakens them to know that it is their vengeance they envelope!"

It was well that the ghostweb was becoming an ally, for of the swarming horror that ceaselessly converged upon us, there appeared no end. When the dawn had fanned out silver across half the sky, we beheld a host of the hellbugs dimpling the water's wide pane, and we knew that yet more were groping out along the lake-bottom, for the ghost-silk kept turning them up for us to kill.

Endlessly we fought them, and as they came swarming, their thought coruscated across the lake—not the articulate, sardonic mentation we had grown to know, but a wildfire of emotion, a repeated pulse of alarm, whose only decipherable content seemed to be: *It is she! The enemy!*

We fought the sun up, fought it two hours, three hours high. We were fighting in a desperate fever now, our orbit tight to the silken planet, our efforts focussed on the monsters that had actually seized hold and clung to it. The bright globe turned endlessly now, and as fast as we hewed away one clinging spawn, two more had latched a grip. The sky's perfect blue, the bright profusion of sunlight made the horror of that swarming lake more horrid still, while at the same time it made vaguely visible our bubbled captive, frozen on his raft, the larger image of those who swarmed to reach him.

There he crouched just as we had bound him, while of the embryonic saviour we had embowered in him, there was no sign at all, and the brute mathematics of our plight were already too terrifyingly plain: the raft would soon be overwhelmed. Even as we hewed and lopped and stabbed one attacker, two more clung to the fabric and furiously fanged it. The ghostly fire stung them back, but their mad élan was that of a race combatting its extinction, and already the fabric was torn, here and there, and though it blazed and smoked at these wounds, and slowly re-closed itself, the wounds were beginning to outrace the repairs.

Then the witch called the skiff alongside of us and held the two craft at a hover, gunnel to gunnel. "Make room!" she cried to Shinn and Olombo, and the three of us abandoned the yawl and joined our friends in the skiff.

"I've precious little flight left to command, and my allowance cannot be wholly spent," she told us. To the yawl she cried, "Down! Auger that brute!" The empty craft swung upsidedown and plunged its mast to the hilt in the abdomen of a huge spawn clinging to the embattled sphere.

And still we five defended this sphere from our littler boat, but already we could feel the speed of our dives diminishing, and feel a tremor in the craft

when we held at hover for stabbing and chopping.

All too soon, Jaundyssa shrieked an obscenity, pulled our skiff up through a high sweep, and brought us streaking towards the shoreline where a huge, ancient crook-oak towered above its fellows. We swarmed into the upper boughs with our sword-tipped oars, whose weight, less magic-buoyed, we were beginning to feel. The witch gestured the skiff away, to kill an out-swimming spawn by crashing into its eyeclusters.

The convergent spawn, though so powerfully called by the scent of their enemy, were not indifferent to our own food-scent, and they came at once legging up through the great boughs of our perch. Our sword-fanged oars were cruelly weighty now, and all our thews and sinews ached with the long night's desperate work. I most heartily wished the thief and Mav back with us, adding their fierceness at arms to our waning fire. I was grateful for the sun's brilliance overhead, betraying the spiderkin's ascent amidst the maze of branches.

Until that same flood of light revealed something within the websphere that made us cry aloud with fear and dismay. For even at our present distance we could plainly see our huge captive A'Rak awaken from his paralysis, and lurched mightily upon the raft, snapping his bonds and rearing fangs and forelegs high.

Bitter gall filled our hearts, knowing now our fate. The monster thrust powerfully at the sphere from within, tearing the silk wide open and flinging a trio of his lesser brothers from the sphere by the force of the blow.

"We are lost!" I cried—my despair tore it from me.

"Wait!" shrieked the witch, and the instant after, the giant on our raft surged again—but convulsively this time. His fangs unsheathed, and reared as if to strike, but then he violently outspread his every leg at once, and his flat midsection split right down the middle, and Pam'Pel, the terror and glory of her mighty eyes, emerged.

She shed the spider like a shucked cloak; hollow it collapsed behind her. Though her wings were still womb-wet and stunted, they began to hum. They kindled to a silver blur and lifted her. And as she took flight, she touched her gaster to torn globe of ghost-silk.

The bubble burst to a spray of color, a polychromatic blizzard that flamed like siegefire on the A'Rakspawn it struck. The ghost stuff consumed them, and then fled up through the bright air, unravelling in brilliant threads of smoke that seemed to sigh and sing as they melted skywards.

Pam'Pel hung in the air above the lake. Mighty she was, as beautifully implacable as a great black scimitar. And yet, for all the slaughter of spawn she had just wrought, and for all that the surviving host of spiders wheeled and fled now as one, and for all that those assailing us scuttled down the crook-oak's great trunk and away—still my heart misgave me when I beheld her slightness. The host she had emerged from still would have overloomed her alive. How could she encounter the fabled hugeness of the A'Rak?

"Lo where she comes!" shrilled the witch. "Down! Down!"

And indeed we stepped lively getting down from the tree, for however comparatively small, she was as big as a farmhouse, and she was making wing straight for the tree we perched in, with no sign in the vast black gems of her eyes that she noted our presence there.

The five of us footed it through the lakeside woods for some time before we came far enough around the lake to see the dire alien clinging to the great tree, drying her wings, drinking in the sunlight. She had grown in size and wingspan, but not enough, I thought in my heart—not near enough!

"Soon she'll go a-hunting him," the witch told us, "and we must make haste to see it. A modicum of motive thaumaturgy remains to me. We must improvise for maximum yield."

When we reached the lakeshore village, she gestured a skiff into air and caused it to twirl, flinging out a pair of husks. She brought this skiff to the highway, got us all aboard her, and summoned an invisible something up

under the keel to carry us on its back. It jolted like a heavy plod but made a speed like a pair of racing skinnies, a bone-rattling ride, and not improved by the being's stench, which was that of a freshly stocked charnel house in midsummer. On towards Big Quay it sped us.

NIFFT X

Titanoplods accoutered for siege-work wear a vast, horned battering helmet that envelops their prognathous skulls and has a flared collar of steel that protects their shoulders and back. Likewise the squashers—clawed steel boots—protect their forelimbs from the fangstrokes of any but the hugest spawn. But the A'Rak's larger defenders overleapt this armor, crushing the mahout and sinking lethal fangs in the giant's hindquarters. We quickly learned to deploy our mast-spear teams to flank the plods and impale these monsters as they descended, but we lost both beasts and drivers as often as not.

We set more than half the plods to battering down the buildings that demarked this corner of the square in order to widen our avenue of approach, while a phalanx of them continued to press against the salient of defenders and provide cover for the pumpwagons to spew flammables across a slowly widening arc. Our archers kept a hail of fire arrows falling from the rooftops, and an ever broadening crescent of prey husks and defenders blazed brightly.

But the A'Rak, in the immense sarcophagus of his bloated, broken frame, crouched still untouched by the flame and fury of our best assaults, though his bodily envelope was as dull and ashen as if fire had indeed swept across it, and his legs, all crooked and torqued, seemed just such fireswept vines and roots as a forest conflagration leaves in its wake.

A hasty consultation between me, Mav, Pandagon and Minim produced a desperate improvisation. Samption and I, with a squad of flanking spearmen, retrieved two mobile cargo-cranes from the quayside, whose slings we wrapped round a pair of pumpwagons that we'd taken the wheels off of. The Ecclesiarch directed two mahouts in a clumsy effort to steady their titanoplods as we set these wagons atop their backs.

I and Samption and a squad of spearmen swarmed up the netted flank of one of the beasts, while Pandagon and his adjutants mounted the other. We

swayed forward, the footing like that on the back of a Behemoth at full gallop.

Our mount hooked his helmet horn into the underside of an attacking spawn. Its legs and fangs rattled on the flared steel collar as our men cranked the bellows and Samption sent an arc of Kolodrian aquavit onto the arrayed monsters fronting us. At a torch clamped to our wagon rail I lit fire arrows and sent them winging after the streaming spirits, arrow after arrow, each new one loosed before the last had struck. We were sowing fields of fire far deeper in the ranks of our enemy now.

And then the A'Rak gave a shudder that shook the entire plaza—or rather, what was in him did. Had a flash of brilliance coruscated across the array of his dulled eyes?

Yes, for the eyecluster ruptured now, and a knoll, a very hillock of new eyes thrust dazzling into the light. The same dorsal rupture continued along his cephalothorax and up his abdomen, while his legs had begun to thrash and turmoil like a nest of mighty vipers.

What erupted from the A'Rak's already mighty husk was half again his former size, such that the moult fell away in rags and tatters.

Jet black and brightly glinting as wet tar was the A'Rak now. This blackness was shot through with streaks of crimson, so that in the bright noon his hugeness seemed to smoulder. His eyes were now three score and two, faceted gems deep and star-strewn as the cosmic abyss, a hill of eyes whose malign and fiery sentience sent horror like an ice-rill up my spine. Each of his legs was an added joint in length, so he crouched on a higher, more elegantly baroque array of flying buttresses. His abdomen tapered more sharply, the tip nozzled with more a complex artillery of spinnerettes.

These spinnerettes now flickered too swiftly for eye to follow, and from them gouted up coruscant sheets and billows of ghost-silk. Like tidal waves they came towering through the air, fanning out and filling the sky as the monster cast leftwards and rightwards, looming towards us all sun-shot as they blotted out that orb, so that I fancied I saw a twisted weave of

vaporous arms and faces within the silk, even as I bellowed, "Jump!"—and suited my own action to that word.

Belatedly, for we were already airborne. We plunged chest deep into the leathery husks of folk and spiders as the falling sheets netted the titanoplods and anchored on the rooftops surrounding the plaza.

Our forces stumbled back in mad retreat, leaving plods and pump-wagons and cargo hoists shrouded in the silk-fall. A few moments' work for the reborn A'Rak left the whole square fenced in a wall of webbing which draped every building and walled off all the street approaches with one continuous lurid tapestry. Then, as his guard recoiled even more tightly around him, he sent new salvos of silk towering into the sunlight. These sprang flashing zig and zag, and in moments the whole square was roofed by a latticework of webbing. An indecipherable pulse of spiderthought whelmed from the A'Rak then, and his whole perimeter of spawn swarmed up his lifted legs, which he raised ladderlike, and deployed themselves atop the lattice, rearing up fangs and forelegs toward the sky, interposing themselves between their sire and that vast, empty blue.

A while longer the A'Rak flung webbing that looped and arabesqued through the existing weave and tightened it. We dragged ourselves free of the human detritus we'd plunged in, and stood helplessly watching through the silken walls' chromatic distortion the giant at his work.

It struck us all that this diaphanous profusion that the A'Rak flung with such projectile grace was nothing less than the city of Big Quay itself—was at least three quarters of its citizens, was their skins and their souls transmogrified into this lurid stuff that crackled with the very essences of rage and dolor. The inhabitants of the southern hemisphere's richest entrepot had rendered their god the ultimate tithe, and on the awful spindles of his fangs had been spun into the fabric of his armor against his enemy, and in that moment, knowing what I knew, it was plain—to me at least—that it was for precisely such an end as this that the monster had groomed and patronized and cultivated them for so long.

Yet even as the A'Rak completed these elaborate, spawn-crusted defenses, he scarcely seemed to need them. He radiated invincibility. More elaborately jointed and fanged, the living architecture of him had a devilish panache. The very hairs he bristled with were longer, complex pennate structures that flexed and palped the air, so that his shagginess was like a meadow in the breeze, rippling with the movement of his sensors. Like a great black-and-red ember of sentience he stood there, his hugeness exquisitely poised, and fairly vibrated with awareness.

For the first time, after the many hours of battle, he spoke to us. The whelm of his thought had now an abyssal *thrumm* of energy to it, as if his augmented mentation resonated within just such a cyclopaean benthos as the Sunless Sea he had told me of, that deep-hid abyss inside doomed Arthro-Pan'doloron:

Citizens! Why do ye assail and contend against me? Am I not now yet grander, more magnificent a deity, than ever I was these two hundred years of our Covenant? Two centuries of wealth! Does this not pay, and overpay, a single one of your brief generations, taken in my hour of extremest need? For I call to witness all gods that ever were: am I not now the match of the mightiest?

What do I not hear? I can hear your sun a-burning, hear the roiling of its heat titanic, hear a dissonance that will, in time not distant, cause your star a grave convulsion mortal to millions on this earth of yours. And what can I not feel? I feel the distant past of this spot your city stands on, when, time out of mind, the crushing advent of a colossal wave did smite these hills into their present shape. Past and future alike I can sense. How Time vies for my mind from all directions! The cosmic micro-sleet the stars exhale—I can count each exiguous particle of it that strikes me.

And what can I not see? I see you there, thief, and you, my chief priest, treacherously making war against me! Have ye no conscience? Is rectitude fled from the bosoms of men? What of our Covenant, Priest?

The sly, teasing tone of this, coming from a being so huge, was wholly unnerving, but Pandagon was already swarming up the rope-laddered flank of a new plod, and I followed him up it. Though the new elevation did not bring us near the A'Rak's level, it let our forces hear Pandagon, and readied them to take their cue from him. "Great A'Rak!" he cried, "how are we traitors? How can a Covenant be just that gives us a fortune then slaughters us every one before we can spend even a copper of it?"

The resonance of his sole voice through the city was a visceral reminder that Big Quay was now—save for our army—empty; a necropolis, all its souls humming and burning in the ghostweave. How nobly large Pandagon loomed now in his native city! The man had *reached* that pinnacle that I had from the first sensed he yearned for. His benign ambition now indeed bestrode the destiny of his nation. He spoke for them all, at the head of their survivors in arms, and it was his voice that flung defiance at the monster that had battened on his race two hundred years and more.

Then another sound began to mix with the echoes of his retort, and when all of us suddenly raised our faces to the sky whence it came—a high, pure hum like plucked steel bowstrings—then Pandagon, with inspired aptness, trumpeted:

* * *

"Listen, A'Rak!:

When the wing-song of her hunger
Serenades thee from the sky,
And the bright barb of her anger
Seeks thy life—thou knowest why! . . ."

* * *

This rhymed riposte made the giant recoil. With the smooth speed of falling, the vibration grew louder, till it seemed the very sky was a plucked

string. And here came Pam'Pel, a-hovering down.

Not a quarter his size she looked, but her perfection was awesome, the tapered curve of her thorax and spike-tipped abdomen so gracefully lethal, the broad silver swords of her wings—the ghost of their form oddly visible within the invisibility of their blurred vibration—and her head with its two great globed eyes, a triune sphere her head was, with these eyes, full of a remorseless intelligence as black and deep as space. She fell to her predatory task as if but a moment, instead of eons, had interrupted it.

The spawn that swarmed the canopy raised a thorny flourish of fangs and forelegs at her. Liquidly she dropped, curving stinger-first up under a huge spawn's assault, and touched him quick once, twice, and curved out from under, swept up and dropped again, tucking her stinger—once, twice—under a second assailant. The pair of them crumpled and shrunk into a twitching clench of paralyzed legs, but already she had dipped again, striking now the web itself where she had cleared it of its defenders.

She touched her stinger to the silk here, and there, and there, seeming more seamstress than slayer now, tucking and tugging and adjusting, and a long, complex shudder went through the web as a whole. The spawn that swarmed it trembled at the shock, and danced little gingerfoot jigs of unease, as Pam'Pel now swept everywhere, dodging the leaps of defenders, and touching her stinger to her prey's woven roof.

And that great net vibrated now, boiled with change. Long rents split it, and the ragged edges, toothed with flames of feverish color, leapt like tongues to lick the legs of the spawn and fetter them in burning bandages of silk. The net became a writhing vipers' nest. The silk seized the spiders, shackled them, shrouded them, mummied them, clenched them, and crushed them. The crackle of collapsing exoskeleton filled the air. And when the silk had crushed them, it burned them—turned to lurid flame from which streamed up brief gaudy wisps of smoke. Ghostly fragments they were that wailed faintly, musically away in the sunlight, the plundered dead escaping at last into the sweet infinitude of light!

They were confronted then, the roofless A'Rak and his nemesis, with only empty air between.

A flux of alien cerebration joined them. Thought ice-cold and absolute whelmed down from Pam'Pel, while from the A'Rak, wrath and resolution radiated back.

She dove to the attack. He flung, with invisibly quick flickers of his spinnerettes, a barrage of silk up at her, bright rags of a lethal garment to entangle her blazing wings. The diaphanous gouts came with a speed and profusion that plainly disconcerted the millennial huntress. She veered, veered again, and found she'd been edged into the path of a projectile she could not quite dodge, and which snared her trailing legs and dragged her down. Up surged the A'Rak, titanically graceful, and his fangs swept scimitaring down and raked her abdomen, just failing to plant their points, as Pam'Pel heaved upward and wrenched herself away.

She hovered, working her stinger into the shackling silk, which she awoke to revolt, so that it fell away from her legs to drop down upon one of the giant's legs, whose hugeness its fire could harm no more than to make the monster falter but a step, and then he leapt back to the counterattack as down again she came at him.

Again and again he drove her back. A second, and then a third time, his fang-stroke came within a hair of killing her. Yet it was not in her to desist from the hunt. She would have him, or die trying, and now she was visibly tiring, while the A'Rak's energy, and his gluttonized wealth of silk, were just as plainly inexhaustible.

There came a pause that we all knew was to be the last. There was a taunt now in the mentation that rippled up, as it seemed, from the A'Rak's hill of eyes, while the answer from Pam'Pel's orbs was as implacable as ever, even though the power of her wing-song faltered now.

Then there approached from behind us a shrill, clamoring voice. We turned as one. Here, up the broad boulevard full of troops and materiel, came a little wooden skiff, an oarless rowboat with some people in it, skimming

through the air perhaps an ell above the ground. One of its passengers was standing in the bow, shrieking, while the others clutched the gunnels behind her. They swept nearer. The screecher was Jaundyssa, and her cry was:

"Up! Up! We've just enough left, damn your vile demon arse! Up and at him!"

And indeed, then, up came the skiff, grudgingly accelerating. Pandagon and I ducked on our 'plod as the boat's keel just cleared our heads and plunged —no doubt with the witch's last iota of sorcerous assistance—through the web wall still confronting us. We watched dumbfounded as the witch, with her nuncial passengers, hurtled the little craft in a rising arc, and then dove in a trajectory clearly aimed at the A'Rak's eyecluster.

The giant, beholding them, made one flicker, one pulse of hesitation, and in that instant Pam'Pel dove, and slipped beneath his hugeness, and touched her stinger amidst his under-joints: once, twice, thrice . . . and the A'Rak was hers.

LAGADEME X

"Eat Keel, Hellbug!" The shriek—Jaundyssa's as we plunged toward the A'Rak—echoes still in my memory, where the vision we dove towards also lives indelible. Nothing of all the spawn we had seen had prepared us for the A'Rak himself. Pam'Pel had grown greatly in the hours since we had left her, but still he dwarfed her.

His eyes commanded all directions, and, as we streaked towards them, though their myriad sunstruck facets flashed rainbow fragments, a deeper glint of the monster's unguarded thought sparked through them. I like to think that it was bafflement, that our tiny, bizarre assault-craft, our motley little gaggle of human shapes, disconcerted the giant, and for all our littleness, we so perplexed him that we snared his mighty limbs for just that heartbeat's time Pam'Pel required to plant paralysis within his bowels.

For surely one brief forelimb's flicker would have swatted us into oblivion, and this he might have ministered with no lapse of his focus on Pam'Pel.

Our power was spent even as she stung him. "Hang on!" the witch cried needlessly. We plunged into a ghastly terrain of human husks which buckled and crackled under us like hard-cured leather and brittle wood. We found our feet with loathing on this substrate, and watched the giant sinking, sinking down upon his crumbling, clenching legs.

Citizens! To your deity's defense! Make haste! Take arms against the alien monster who assails him!

For all the force of thought in this outcry, the A'Rak's last clear utterance, there was as well a cloudiness, a vague indirection, as if it had not aimed quite rightly at our minds. Thus he sank to incoherence, a cold sleet of mentation radiating vagrantly, indecipherably, towards the sky.

Ah, Jaundyssa! Indefatigable, relentless witch, I had to love her, for all her odiousness, in that moment. For she clambered up one of the A'Rak's folded

legs, fearlessly gripping his dense fur—climbed to a kneelike projection, perched there, and trumpeted to the town at large:

"Bring axes, saws! Bring swords and scythes! Hack off his legs! He has no more need of them, hee-hee! No more gavottes will he gambol! No more jigs will he jiggety-jig! He embarks on a long term a-dreaming, while he's eaten alive from within! Then he goes into the tomb for a term without end!"

We swarmed, blades flashing, like ants on the carcass. Each joint of his legs was a galleon's mainmast. We heaped the husky dead into isolated hills, and on each hill we teepeed several of the leg-joints. Then the pumpwagons drenched the dead and joints alike. Brandy, Behemoth sap, lamp oil, aquavit—every flammable stored in Big Quay's cornucopic warehouses flooded the square, fire arrows fell like rain, and all around the legless monster, pyres roared. To their smoke was joined the bright, carnival colors of the vast shroud of ghostweb burning away, released by touches of Pam'Pel's stinger. Thus did Big Quay's countless dead receive their deliverance.

The remnant of A'Rak—a planetoid of abdomen, an infernal apparatus of eyes and fangs—though reduced, still seemed a sure impossibility for Pam'Pel to lift. But down she hovered, once we had trimmed him, and hooked the dangle of her slender legs beneath his fangs, and lift him she did. Her wings great silver clarions of clamorous power, she raised his limp immensity slowly, inexorably. A haze of delirious mentation still auraed the giant and she dragged him thus jabbering and dreaming aloft, and aloft, and away to the west, the pair of them growing tiny in the flawless blue.

The witch, who had been in close conversation with the Ecclesiarch Pandagon, his assistant, and Nifft, now commandeered a titanoplod for a second podium, though she was the cynosure of all eyes and scarcely needed a proscenium, so strident was her voice.

"Harken citizens! You now, it seems, confront another danger, grave and urgent, and this one you won't have *me* to save you from! Know, all you women and men of Big Quay, that the coming of Pam'Pel was *known*

abroad, and that even now round the Haagsford's Estuary a flotilla of pirates and brigands floats, wolvish opportunists all, tongues a-loll for Hagia's guardless vaults! Lay not by your arms, nor unbuckle your armor, and such semblance of an army as you've muddled into, *maintain*! Hold ranks! Take ship! Deploy on land and sea at once, and you may nip invasion in the bud! Priests! And you, thief, come up where they can see you!. . . . These three seem able soldiers. Embrace their command, for your lives hang on it! I am no longer at your service, as I've said. Your erstwhile god now wings it to Mount Horad in my native Strega, where the great Gnarlbone and her sisters have granted Pam'Pel a lodgement for her brood, and where I too am awaited with a Triumph for the completion of my Opus Eponymous. There I will formally don the mantle of my self-made name, and enter Sorcery's deathless Annals as Jaundyssa the A'Raknicide!" (She paused to gesture as if modestly dismissing our applause, though a stunned silence lay on us all.) "Thank me not! Greatness must express itself. I am glad its byproduct has been your benefit. Farewell!"

She was gone. By what thaumaturgic allowance this dramatic withdrawal was accomplished I cannot say. None of us dwelt on it long. A babble of talk raged, the terror of invasion flashing from every eye. The Priests, calling orders from 'plod-back, assembled the miscellaneous cohorts of citizens-in-arms around the core of mercenaries they commanded. The survivors began to take on an air of military prowess, and once the idea of a counterstrike took hold, fervor began to burn away fear in our spirits. Our blood was up for a fight, and after what we had just fought, an encounter with human cutthroats loomed like a lark, a festival, scarcely a fray at all.

I and my crew were no exceptions. I do not think I can convey the delirious *optimism* that fills one who has just had a hand in slaying a giant. No form of horror or harm could now daunt us. On this summer day so near solstice, hours of light yet remained to us. What a fine thing it seemed to sail and march quick downriver and slay a few brigands and pillagers to round out the long trance of battle we had been locked in!

Our generals developed their strategy in plain sight of all, calling questions on this detail or that to individuals in the throng. I noted that Nifft was

much consulted by the churchmen on something which, by their gestures, was downriver.

The hasty colloquy ended with the thief leading our naval arm down the Haagsford while the churchmen brought the army overland in a two-pronged march to intercept invaders already ashore and roll them back to the coast. The thief willingly took my crew aboard his vessel, a longish but yare caravel.

"We've been fighting from boats since last night," I pleasantly told the thief, as we made sail down the open river, and we all took some rest on the foredeck. "This seems the natural way to conclude the struggle. You know, Nifft, it occurs to me to ask you about that rumor you came here a-peddling. I can't think you selfishly hoarded it while en route. Did you share it with others as you came? For the, ah, theft you had in view would be facilitated —would it not?—if you were not the only thief the vaults' guardians had to deal with?"

"I will not deny," he affably answered, "that I passed the rumor on, nor that my thinking ran very much along the lines that you suggest. You must understand, though, that I had no suspicion of the almost total overthrow of A'Rak-kind here. I imagined that the cutthroats I might bring here would all be encountered by spider-kind, not the citizens themselves."

We were three dozen vessels (hewn free with some labor from webbing that anchored the keels) carrying ballistas, carrying even pumpwagons with the wheels off. All this armament was hid under tarps, and we kept our troops well hidden too. We came out of the estuary looking much like a miscellany of refugees fleeing with their goods. Our prey flocked to *us*, thinking us the quarry. By sunset a dozen brigands' vessels wandered rudderless and blazing on the tide, while a good dozen others had already gone down. We lost a brace of craft, but scarce a score of lives. The priests' forces were fighting ashore with similar result, driving routed pillagers back to the beaches in time for us to beach, and join the slaughter.

Night fell with some few hundreds of the enemy surrounded in a coastal valley, and the skirmishing went on the next day too, but I and my crew and the thief were not to see its conclusion. To our consternation, Jaundyssa suddenly appeared at our coastal bivouac before the morrow's sun appeared, and spirited us away to Strega—literally, in an airborne coach pulled by neffrits. We *must*, it seemed, the odious one declared, come to stand witness on her behalf before the Sisters, who were denying certification of her Opus Eponymous because, in the last moments of its execution, she had slightly exceeded her thaumaturgic allowance.

One shaft of the light falling down from the lofty clerestory of the Archosororion—in which cyclopaean chamber Strega's grandest, grimmest witches sit in council—fell upon Gnarlbone the Bearded, and limned in profuse detail the seamed and gullied terrain of her visage, for though her sorcery had procured her centuries of life, she disdained to banish from her face the marks of their passage. Her anthracite eyes glimmed from whorled pits of flesh. Beside her, the only other grandee present, sat the lean, ophidian Dame Eelritter.

My crew were comfortably domiciled. Only the thief and I had been called to give testimony to the details of Jaundyssa's performance. The candidate herself stood by fatly fuming, gnashing her teeth against an imperiously commanded silence.

When Nifft and I had done with our testimony, Gnarlbone lifted a clawed forefinger that seemed impossibly long, and crooked it at me. I approached her lofty bench. Gnarlbone had a bubbly growl like a huge old boar.

"I note, Nuncio, that yon Ephesionite rogue finds our applicant wondrous canny. Called her a marvellously apt improvisor—did you not, rogue?"

Nifft genuflected with studious courtesy—one is not petulant with hags of this stature. "I did indeed, great Gnarlbone. Please forgive me for suggesting that I would feel less discomfort if referred to as `Nifft,' or simply, `Ephesionite.' "

"Forgive *me* for suggesting I don't give a roaring damn for a rascal's discomfort, Sir Rascal—with your permission, rogue, of course."

"Of course, Great Gnarlbone," Nifft suavely bowed.

The sorceress bent her brambly brows again on me. "You, on the other hand, Dame Nuncio, pronounce Jaundyssa at once brazen and devious, arrogant and sly, though you seem to concede her fervent devotion to her task. I also note that you hold this Ephesionite's thievish calling to be as odious and vile as I myself do deem it—though I will say that *this* thief is a good cut above the lot as regards moral fiber.

"I will say to you both that your personal differences lend particular persuasiveness to the essential agreement of your testimony. Your very denunciations of her deviousness, Dame, are but sour testaments to what the thief calls her invention.

"The end of our deliberations are not for the laity to know. However, I do not yet dismiss you both, but rather commission you, for I have resolved to reward your valor against the alien, Dame, by doing you a service. You are to bring back your son here from among the Hydrobani, and take him to Mount Horad, and display to him the wonder you have had a hand in. And you, thief, are especially commissioned to exert yourself to bring the Nuncio and her son into accord."

"May I humbly inquire," Nifft said, "if my part in this commission in some way rewards my valor against the alien?"

"Your valor against the alien, oh Ephesionite Nifft, purchases my present patience with you, for it is not my way to suffer thieves gladly."

Nifft bowed another polite acknowledgement, but I recoiled powerfully from the proposition. "Forgive me, great Gnarlbone, but he is precisely the sort of man whose contact with my son I would most abhor!"

"You will have the goodness to trust my wisdom, or I will convey you to the Glacial Maelstroms, Dame, where you may lie frozen for a thousand years."

"Yes, great Gnarlbone."

To the battlements of the Archosororion she brought us and bade us step through the skin of a great clear bubble that hung above the balustrade. Within this tenuous conveyance, we sprang skywards with no more than a gentle sense of acceleration. We shot to a height so great as to make a grand relief map of Strega's black crags.

Indeed, our flight northeastward was a cartographer's dream, with distant glimpses of the peaks of the Ingens Cluster sinking away to our right, even as the Great Reefs began to dimple our northern horizon.

Nifft, masking, I think, a sulkiness over my recent remarks, said he felt tired, and lay in the comfortable curve of the bubble-floor gazing on the view below. I was, however, unwilling to lose this last chance to clarify how he must proceed with my son. I opened as tactfully as possible. I observed that while his prompt military efforts against the invaders in some part atoned for the crime of luring them to Hagia, the fact that the Donative had, in all likelihood, emptied all the monastia of their gold, meant that this noble gesture of his cost him little enough. Now that his rumor was truth, and the gates of all the vaults hung unguarded, there wasn't a jot of gold to be had from them. He dismissed this—the emptiness of *all* the vaults—as rank conjecture.

I turned to my real concern. Such callous adventuring with other peoples' lives as Nifft's rumor-mongering had been, I told him, was just the kind of moral contamination I feared him infecting my son with. For Persander had already ventured on his own onto a cynical path, and this had led to our break in the first place.

With an air of patience I found somehow irritating, Nifft pressed me for the account of this break. I was loathe to give it, but considering how the witch had shackled us together in this encounter, I ended by answering his questions, some of which concerned my son's professional doings as far as I knew them.

"Lagademe," he proposed at length, "let me speak to him first, in your hearing of course—but let me present our commission to him, more crisply than your emotional involvement would allow you to do, I think."

I found that in part I actually preferred this. Had it been left to my will, I would have been ashamed to seek Persander out after embarrassing him professionally. It helped to think the thief would present our case to my son and point out I had not willingly come to trouble him again so soon.

And already we were plummeting towards the great raft city that sat on the gentle turquoise swell of the Great Shallows. I had just time to wonder how we were to find Persander in this hive, when the bubble had plumped down on the boardwalk before a casino, causing the revellers—few at noontide—to jump, and placing us directly in front of my son, who was standing in the entry of the establishment—the Golden Die—apparently shilling for it. Though he'd grown to such a wonderfully self-possessed young man, the sight of us in our apparitional vehicle caused his jaw to sag noticeably.

Nifft stepped out with a graceful salutation, and smoothly produced our tale. My son at the first stared at me in stupefaction enough, but the thief's words soon amazed him in another manner.

For this Ephesionite Nifft, forsooth—it soon appeared from my son's enthusiasm—was a thief of no small renown within the demimonde my son had chosen to inhabit.

"You are Nifft the Karkmahnite, friend of Shag Margold, and also called Nifft the Lean?" my boy asked with visible delight.

"The same, sir, at your service, and a more earnest admirer of your mother's courage and character than myself, esteemed Persander, you would have to look long and hard to find."

My chagrin at my son's admiration for my former spearman may be imagined, though the glad warmth of my son's embrace, when he stepped into the bubble, quite banished all pain from me while it lasted.

"Behold, dear Mother, with a hop and a skip I leave my paltry pimping post. Let us cross the ocean at once, if you need me to do so."

"My precious Persander! They demoted you! And it was my fault entirely, wasn't it?!"

He laughed. "Entirely! Ah Mother, what broils you can blunder up! It is your sweetest quality! I was only marking time here though—I was already restless before you dropped by."

We were airborne again. The thief asked, "Was it glyfrig you were playing? Do you know it was my friend Margold who first noted the analogy between glyfrig's ikonic scale and the card spells of the Ikastrian Tundra shamans? He has not fully established the truth of his suspicion that glyfrig adepts are gifted pupils of that important branch of wizardry, but he tells me he expects to do so."

"The August Margold, sir, is quite simply one of the greatest luminaries of our age. And you enjoy his friendship, and casually engage him in conversation!"

"I do indeed, and it is undeniably a privilege to envy. And nothing would give me greater pleasure than to introduce you to him. Indeed, since you are a man of parts and clearly have hero's blood in you" (a nod at me here) "I can take the liberty of promising you he'll soon be suggesting the most interesting cartographic surveys you could perform for him! That is to say, explorations of places chancy or wholly unknown. He'll not only suggest them, but fit you out with a ship and a subsidy, sometimes. . . ."

What need to go on? My son was wholly taken by the man, and enthralled by the prospects he dangled. And, as I sat listening to them, and watching the Aristoz Island chain glide under us like a mighty flotilla of tree-clad mountains patrolling the southwestern rim of the Great Shallows, quite suddenly, I ceased to fear for him.

For how could Persander's soul not be good and true—was he not still and always my precious son? And granting that, what control could there be

over the rest? So vastly does the wide world outreach our firmest intent, that even those of us who strive to repeat ourselves—in probity, in method, whatever—in the end do every thing we do for the very first time, just like everyone else. My precious Persander was busy doing everything for the very first time, so let him rummage his way and sift things a bit! And since each tick of time is a venture, and each tick is numbered, then by the Crack, let us venture some of our time together, my boy and I, and have at least the joy of our company!

I grew light as a bubble myself in that moment. Jealous anger slipped off my heart as a weight slips off of one's shoulders.

That flight of ours—wonder enough in itself—how it shines in my memory for the gladness it brought my son and me! Before we had reached Strega, though we did that quick enough, it was merrily settled between the three of us that my crew and I would come with them to Karkmahn-Ra, and explore that vast bazaar of cultures and archives for a bit, and then perhaps my son might soon enough find himself interestingly commissioned by Shag Margold—which indeed he has done—while my crew and I could wish no place more bustling to find commissions of our own in—which indeed we have done as well. Meanwhile, in the course of our stay here, I have grown to such a friendship for Margold—that venerable, delightful man!—that he has prevailed on me to write this partial record of our part in A'Rak's fall, and thus add my modest chapter to his trove of wonders.

But I have left the Astrygals, narratively speaking, too soon. On our return to Strega and reunion with Olombo, Shinn and Bantril, Gnarlbone herself, in an air-chariot drawn by a triplet of the hugest and most sinewy-savage 'gnaths I have ever seen, conveyed us all up to Mount Horad, where that worm-holed peak's preeminence broods, gazing, as it were, with black eyesockets down upon the craggy isle.

The day was just declining, the slant sun ruddy amber on the stones, but still enough light fell within the grand cavernmouth of A'Rak's sepulcher to limn his vast and legless bulk. Already a basaltic stele, graven with verses, marked this rude portal to his broodchamber and tomb. The air round the

place was alive—the giant was aura-ed with spiderdream, a deep mentation cycling endlessly, aimlessly with a relentless energy such as men say spins the vast isles of stars through their eons.

And in this indecipherable vortex of alien memory were veins of an eerie, gargantuan nostalgia—remembrance of his glory days of unpent slaughter on his natal world no doubt. These dreams, in their disordered rout, randomly tickled him still with the joy of his past majesty.

"Thus," burbled Gnarlbone, towering and somber, "will his vile unearthly soul unravel for a hundred years, unwinding his deathlust one foul thread at a time from the spindle of life. I honor you all, oh accidental allies, with conveyance to this site. The Sisterhood will remember you all, and not with disfavor. Behold here, then, how Will bestrides epochs, and overswims fathomless space!"

We stood till the sun was down, feeling the echoes of galaxies foregone, of a hunger and hunt without end, and then we turned away. The verses engraved on the stele were these:

* * *

Pompilla's Taunt

In the gulf of a past whereon other stars shone
And another sun beamed than doth beam on this earth,
In a starwheel that spun till its eons were done,
Our troth was first plighted, thy death with my birth.

Betrothed and then sundered! Oh bridegroom, thy terror
made thee flee—fruitlessly!—far from my touch.
But at last of our offspring shalt thou be the bearer,
and I thee impregnate! My daughters shall couch

In thy silken entrails, and nurse on thy meat
while thou liest reposeful as corpse in its tomb
and long wilt thou, living, endure as they eat—
conceiving them, knowing thyself as their womb!

Though thou seek remote suns by planetoids girdled,
and those asteroid torrents thou plunge in and ride,
though hid in such welters of world-rack though hurtle,
my nurselings still bowered in thy bowels shall abide!

Then down time's abyss that yet yawneth before us
they'll go hide-and-seeking, our numberless brood;
the cries of thy stricken sons rising in chorus,
wherever they flee by my daughters pursued!